Administration
Administrative Services *and* Information Technology for Management

Support Notes
[HIGHER]

Learning
Teaching
Scotland

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Administrative Services

Information Technology for Management

Outcome 1

Outcome 1
Explain strategies which can be employed to ensure effectiveness in the workplace

The role and qualities of an administrative assistant

The role of the administrative assistant may be carried out within a general office environment or within a specialised department such as Human Resources, Marketing or Finance; however, although the range of duties may differ, the role will remain the same – that of providing the organisational skills and support to the organisation in terms of information and communication.

The duties an administrative assistant may be asked to carry out will include general office services such as filing, document production, mail handling, reprographics and making travel arrangements. For more experienced or senior administrative assistants, these tasks will become more supervisory in nature and involve increased responsibility. A more senior administrative assistant would be responsible for making decisions and assisting management more directly. In addition they may be responsible for supervising junior administration staff and implementing new systems and procedures.

A more senior administrative assistant will be expected to:

- possess good organisational skills, including the ability to prioritise tasks and meet or negotiate deadlines
- be reliable and discreet
- be an effective coordinator of activity
- be able to work without supervision
- possess high-level communication skills
- liaise well with customers and staff (including middle and senior managers)
- possess good ICT skills and be able to compose and present material such as business letters and memos for themselves and on behalf of others.

Administrative assistants may also be expected to have some knowledge and experience in making and monitoring financial payments or even giving short presentations.

The details of a job are usually found in a document known as a **Job Description** or **Job Specification.** This will list the role, duties and responsibilities of the post; the person/s to whom the post-holder is accountable and for whom they are responsible.

A typical Job Description for a **Senior Administrative Assistant** may detail the role and duties as: ‘To organise and carry out the work of the office services department and to supervise junior administrative staff within the department’.

Outcome 1

Other items included in the Job Description might include:

- preparing and responding to correspondence
- using a variety of software applications including word processing, spreadsheets and databases
- preparing presentation material using appropriate software
- organising general administrative duties (copying, filing, petty cash, travel, etc.)
- supervising junior staff
- organising and recording meetings
- arranging events (e.g. seminars and conferences)
- organising and allocating resources (people, time, equipment)
- researching information
- any other relevant duties allocated by the Administration Manager.

In addition to the Job Description, the **skills** and **qualities** required of a potential employee are usually outlined in a **Person Specification.**

Skills and qualities required of the candidate are often listed and categorised as either desirable or essential. Using the Person Specification allows the selection panel to choose the right person at both the application and the interview stage. An example of a Person Specification is shown overleaf.

Outcome 1

Person Specification	
Job Title: Administrative Assistant	
Specification	**Desirable/Essential**
Physical attributes:	
Qualifications: Minimum HND Administration or equivalent European Computer Driving Licence	 E D
Personal qualities: Good communicator Well organised Team worker Problem solver Ability to delegate Discreet	 E E E E E E
Experience: At least 2 years' experience of office work Meetings administration Working in a team	 E D E
Skills: Good levels of ability with a range of software, e.g. WP, spreadsheet, database, presentation software, e-mail, internet Financial software Shorthand	 E D D
Aptitudes: Numerate Articulate	 D D

Outcome 1

Individual and organisational targets

Action Plans

An Action Plan may be prepared when a larger or longer-term project needs to be planned and outlined to the line manager or may be used to see at a glance how the project should be approached. This kind of plan should show:

- the tasks arranged in the order in which they should be done
- an estimate of the time that each part of the project will take to complete
- any notes to explain actions or changes in priorities.

Some of the tasks detailed on an Action Plan would be transferred to a Priorities List.

More detailed project analysis can be recorded on a 'work plan and review' form, which will be discussed later.

An example of an Action Plan is shown below.

Action Plan (Example)

Name Susan Greenback
Project Compile a database of suitable hotels (UK) for company travel

Estimated Completion Date June

Action required (e.g. Tasks)	**Estimated time for completion**	**Actual time taken to complete**	**Notes**
Discuss with line manager hotel criteria that should be met.	2 hours	3 hours	Possible – costs, facilities, distance from airports/train stations, number of hotels required in each city.
Research hotel information.	6 hours	8½ hours	Possible sources of information: AA/RAC Handbook, Internet, Yellow Pages and Thomson's local directories.
Compile structure of hotel database.	*1 hour*	*45 minutes*	*Suggest to boss additional field should be 'discount offered'.*
Enter data into database records.	5 hours		
Review use of hotels on a regular basis and update records accordingly.	30 minutes monthly		

Outcome 1

Note
1. *Italics* have been used to indicate areas which also feature in the Priorities List.
2. The last two tasks on the Action Plan have still to be completed.

This form (TM2) has been taken from the support materials (procedures pack).

Dealing with changing priorities

Although a Priorities List and Action Plan may be completed methodically, plans may still have to be amended because of unforeseen (unexpected) circumstances. There will be certain occasions when urgent action will be required on the administrative assistant's part and other work that has been planned for that day will have to be tackled later.

The following are examples of unexpected circumstances:

- a member of staff fails to show up for work
- the computer network 'crashes'
- a line manager suddenly changes a deadline for a piece of work.

It should, therefore, be remembered when compiling Priorities Lists and Action Plans that:

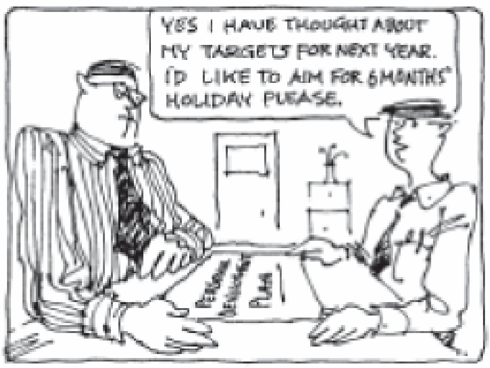
- work schedules should have some degree of flexibility built in
- tasks should not be left to the last minute – planning should ensure that should an unforeseen situation arise, it would be unlikely to make the completion of a task go beyond the scheduled deadline.

Priorities Lists should have a mixture of high, medium and low priority tasks so that some tasks can be delayed if necessary. If a Priorities List only included high priority tasks then an emergency requiring a change to plans would result in the administrative assistant not knowing which task should be left until another day. A mixture of tasks would enable low or medium priority work to be tackled another day, whilst hopefully, leaving some time to deal with the high priority tasks.

Above all, the administrative assistant should remain calm and, if necessary, reschedule work or call on others to help complete the work.

Outcome 1

Setting targets



Targets can appear in many different documents (e.g. on Action Plans, on Priorities Lists, in diaries or on Personal Development Plans) and in many different forms. Whether targets are complex or simple, short term or long term, for an individual or for the organisation, they should all have certain characteristics, i.e. they should be SMART.

SMART stands for:

S **S**pecific – is the target well defined and does it state exactly what is required?
M **M**easurable – is the target measurable in quantifiable or qualitative terms?
A **A**greed – have you discussed and agreed the targets with your line manager?
R **R**ealistic, but challenging – do you have the necessary knowledge and/or skills to complete the target or has an over-ambitious target been set?
T **T**imed – have you set a completion date?

Well defined targets will include some reference to quantity, quality and time. An administrative assistant may be set the following departmental targets following discussion with the line manager:

1. by the end of next month a database of 100 suitable UK hotels for company travel business is to be compiled for use within the organisation;
2. within the next two months the manual filing system detailing employee records is to be transferred to a database;
3. by 30 September the administrative assistant is to attend a training course covering the preparation of PowerPoint presentations.

These targets are SMART and well defined.

Outcome 1

Personal development planning

Individual targets are also important and are likely to be recorded in the **Personal Development Plan** of an employee.

Personal Development Plan = a document which can be used to record formally areas of strength and areas for development. Methods of improving the areas for development along with target dates can also be recorded on the Personal Development Plan.

Employees are encouraged to identify, in discussions with line managers, areas where they have particular strengths and areas where they would wish to acquire or develop knowledge and skills. The information, which is recorded on a Personal Development Plan, can form part of a formal staff appraisal system or be used within an informal staff development and review process. A Personal Development Plan allows an employee to:

- focus on specific aspects of his/her job
- identify skills that the employee already has and which can be shared with other employees
- identify his/her training needs
- expand his/her job role within the organisation.

An example of a Personal Development Plan is shown overleaf.

Outcome 1

Personal Development Plan

Name Susan Greenback

Date	Areas of Competence Identified	Areas of Development Identified	Development Required	Target Date	Review Notes	Initials
30 June	Access database construction. Sorting records on more than one field.	Linking different databases together. More advanced interrogation of information.	Training course in Access at Advanced level.	30 Sept.	Course now attended and putting skills acquired into practice.	SG SK (line manager)
15 Nov.	Geographical filing	Use of PowerPoint package for presentations.	Training course in PowerPoint at Beginner level required.	1 Feb.	Course now attended Agree to put skills into practice by preparing a presentation for next month's team meeting.	SG SK
28 May	Neat and tidy workspace maintained.	Dealing with awkward visitors at Reception.	Time spent with Senior Receptionist to identify ways of handling difficult situations.	30 June	Spent time with the Senior Receptionist. Now looking forward to a week's secondment to Reception.	SG SK

Employee's signature *Susan Greenback*

Line manager's signature *Simon Kemp*

This form (DP1) has been taken from the support materials Procedures Pack.

Outcome 1

Establishing and implementing control mechanisms and monitoring achievement of targets

Where targets are set for employees a system for controlling and monitoring those targets requires to be in place. Such systems should not be over-complicated and should not be viewed by employees as a way in which they are being spied upon. They should be seen as a constructive aid to help the individual worker achieve targets and receive any necessary assistance. Targets can be monitored and controlled using various methods, including:

- random or sample checks of work where some, but not all, tasks are looked over by the immediate superior
- double checks whereby a completed task is also undertaken by the immediate superior in order to pinpoint if there are any problem areas or to ensure results obtained are the same
- buddy systems whereby an employee is paired with a more experienced employee who can be called upon for help and advice
- mentoring systems where an employee is assigned a more senior member of staff (not necessarily the line manager) who can be called upon for help and advice
- Gantt charts which show at a glance whether or not projects are on schedule
- periodic method and systems audits whereby existing procedures are reviewed and, if necessary, amended where the change will result in greater efficiencies or improved work practices.

Control mechanisms should aim to establish sooner, rather than later, whether targets are running to the planned schedule. Systems should, therefore, monitor progress on an on-going basis. Possibly the best method of monitoring progress continuously is to ensure that there are good communication channels in operation which allow employees to discuss whether or not targets are on schedule.

Outcome 1

Progress can be discussed and recorded at:

- regular team meetings
- regular one-to-one meetings between employee and line manager.

Dealing with deviations from planned targets

If there are thorough control and monitoring systems in place then any deviations from targets should soon be spotted. Such deviations from targets should be discussed and, where possible, acted upon. With your line manager you should discuss the following:

1. Were the targets SMART and understood?
2. Did any unforeseen circumstances arise that caused the work to fall behind schedule, e.g. absence from work?
3. Did the actions of others whom you were dependent upon hold up the work?
4. Was the work plan structured correctly or did additional tasks occur after the job started?
5. Did the task extend beyond your capabilities and experience?
6. Did your line manager support you when undertaking the task?

In some instances it will be possible to bring the targets back in line with plans. For example, you may be offered overtime or it may be possible to trim back some tasks. In other situations, however, the completion dates for targets may have to be changed, especially if the circumstances are beyond your control. In such instances it is important to gather all the evidence that you can to justify why a target date has to be changed. It is also helpful to suggest ways in which slippage of targets can be avoided in the future.

In any situation where it is apparent that targets are not going to be achieved it is vital **to remember that the problems must be discussed with the line manager as soon as possible.**

Outcome 1

Time and task management

Time management

One of the most important skills for effective working is that of time management. Time is a resource which is easy to waste – whether it is spending 10 minutes looking for a document we didn't make the effort to store correctly, or talking to colleagues about a problem instead of taking action on it.

Good time-management techniques should ensure that:

- the best use is made of the time available
- time-wasting activities are minimised
- more time is made available for important or urgent jobs.

If time is not managed effectively then problems can arise, for example:

Activity panic
Jobs are left unfinished and the administrative assistant is left running from one crisis to another as deadlines approach.

Reaction not action
Planning of tasks becomes unmanageable and situations arise where the administrative assistant has to react to crises rather than planning and prioritising tasks methodically and carefully.

Work overload
Being pressed for time which results in an ever-increasing list of jobs that still have to be tackled.

Stress
Poor time management leading to stress with the administrative assistant feeling that the work will never be completed.

What causes poor time management?

Time stealers
To overcome the causes of poor time management it is a useful exercise to identify the time stealers (also known as time wasters) that can affect the workflow. The table overleaf identifies the most common time stealers and suggests ways in which they can be tackled so as to improve time management.

Outcome 1

Time stealer	Suggestions for improvement
Lack of forward planning	Make better use of Priority Lists and Action Plans.
The telephone	Learn to control the conversation. Do not allow conversations to run on for too long. If it becomes apparent that there is a lot to be discussed, suggest a meeting at a more appropriate time. Schedule a time of the day to make calls.
Unexpected visits from colleagues	Be polite but firm especially if the person is just looking for a chat. Stand up as the person enters the room. Inform the person you cannot stop work, e.g. ‘I would love to chat, but I really must get on with this piece of work. Why don’t we meet for lunch tomorrow?’ If the person wishes to discuss a work matter let them know it has to be kept brief, e.g. ‘I can only spare 5 minutes at the moment so fire away.’
Taking on too much work	Learn to say *No!* Be assertive. If your work is piling up you must approach your line manager and ask for help or for a halt to new work being allocated until your desk is clear.
Taking work home	Approach your line manager about workload. If realistic aims and targets are set, you should be able to manage your work within the working day.
Not assessing priorities correctly	Take time at the beginning and end of each day to assess what tasks have been completed, what tasks need to be carried forward and what tasks are new. Note all carry-forward tasks on your Priorities List for the next working day. Prioritise the tasks as urgent, must be done, should be done, could be done and could be delegated.
Lack of self-discipline or shuffling papers	Use your Priorities List. Do not procrastinate (put off) tasks which you do not particularly like doing. Tackle one or two uninteresting tasks per day – do not allow them to pile up. Reward yourself for completing these tasks. Practise handling papers only once, i.e. do not keep picking up and putting down papers – deal with them as they arrive whenever possible.
Communication problems	Communicate clearly – recap on instructions that you may be giving to staff or read back tasks allocated to you by your line manager. This cuts down on the time wasted through clarifying obscure messages or checking on missing facts.

Outcome 1

Making unnecessary journeys	Group jobs so that visits to other departments, the photocopier, the mail room, etc. are cut down to one or two trips per day.
Searching for lost papers	File, file, file! Set up and maintain filing systems that are backed up with cross-referencing.
Darting about from one task to another	Prioritise all work and stick to the list (unless emergency situations arise). Finish a task before moving on to the next task on your list.
Delegate	If you have staff in a more junior position to yourself, learn to delegate. Accept that others can do tasks as well as you can.
Book time for yourself	Allow yourself a time slot in the week when nobody (except your line manager) can interrupt you unless it is an emergency. This could involve the use of a ‘do not disturb’ sign, red time (whereby a red sign on the desk means do not disturb) or any other appropriate method of informing colleagues that your work is not to be interrupted.

Task management

An administrative assistant will often have many tasks to deal with at any one time. An orderly and neatly arranged workplace will assist the administrative assistant in carrying out tasks.

The following organisational or planning aids can assist the administrative assistant in managing tasks:

- desk diaries
- electronic diaries
- reminder systems
- Priorities Lists/Action Plans.

It is also helpful to:

1. Keep the workstation tidy, free from clutter

2. Use trays to help organise tasks – these might be labelled: IN, OUT, WORK STARTED (or PENDING), and FOR FILING

Outcome 1

3. Label files clearly

4. Tick off jobs on Priorities Lists/Action Plans as they are completed

5. Replace papers in files and put the files away before leaving the workstation if the administrative assistant is interrupted in the middle of a job

6. Monitor progress carefully, especially where there is a target completion date. If the administrative assistant suspects that the task is not going to be completed on time then he/she should tell the line manager immediately – shortcuts should not be taken. Shortcuts may enable the task to appear to be completed but the work is often of a poorer standard than expected or required.

Effective task management is essential for an administrative assistant. Not only will this help achieve targets and deadlines but it will also help ensure freedom from stress.

You have already looked at how important it is to **plan** work – in terms of time and resources. Many tools exist to help deal with this – from simple daily 'To Do' lists to more long-term Action Plans or Development Plans. In addition to appropriate use of these tools, effective task management involves a number of skills:

- **Organisation –** looking ahead and planning, but also monitoring progress and achievement
- **Prioritisation –** deciding on what is important and what is less so
- **Delegation –** deciding when it would be appropriate to ask someone else to do some of the tasks – doing a good job isn't about doing everything yourself
- **Control –** tackling work calmly and in priority order
- **Assertiveness –** saying 'no' when necessary
- **Negotiation –** being able to negotiate deadlines and resources if necessary
- **Resource management –** using time, staff and equipment appropriately
- **Evaluation –** seeking improvement and identifying the causes of any problems.

Impact on the organisation and the individual

Effective time and task management lead to a number of benefits to both the individual and the organisation, including:

- increased productivity
- increased quality of work
- good customer relations – through meeting deadlines/orders, etc.
- increased competitiveness in the marketplace
- lower stress levels amongst staff
- good work relationships
- job satisfaction.

Outcome 1

However, the consequences of poor task and time management can include:

- poor productivity
- poor quality of work
- increased costs
- unmet deadlines
- unhappy customers/suppliers
- low level of competitiveness in marketplace
- stress-related absence
- poor work relationships
- poor job satisfaction.

Team working

The expression ‘no man is an island’ is very true – it is not often that people can successfully work alone without the need for anyone else.

In today’s competitive environment, organisations recognise the benefits to be gained from team working. Changing working practices have therefore included more team work.

A team can be defined as a group who have been specially formed for a particular purpose – to achieve a particular aim. A team is characterised by three factors:

- a shared purpose or goal
- a sense of belonging to a team (having an identity)
- a dependence/reliance on each other.

There have been many studies into what makes teams effective and researchers have attempted to pinpoint the characteristics of good teams. Meredith Belbin, one of the leading management ‘gurus’, who has studied team working and written numerous books on the subject, identified a number of factors which affected teams:

Team size: According to Belbin, an effective team will normally consist of around 4 to 6 team members (although that really depends on the nature of the task – a larger team might be better for, say, building a house!). Too large a team and there is a danger of a situation where sub-groups within the team start to form and break away. In addition, quieter members may not get a chance to speak up or participate in a larger team. Too small a team and there is the danger of one person dominating or of too few ideas/skills being shared among the group.

Team roles: According to Belbin, those teams which work effectively have members who adopt a number of roles. Belbin identified **nine** of these roles which the members of an effective team, whatever its size, will clearly fulfil.

Outcome 1

Belbin's team roles

- *An ideas person* – someone who is creative and has vision
- *A motivator* – someone to get things moving
- *An organiser* to coordinate and pull things together
- *An implementer* – someone who can get tasks started
- *A checker* – someone who crosses the T's and dots the I's
- *A finisher* – someone who will make sure tasks get completed
- *A go -getter* – someone who will seek out resources, make contacts etc.
- *A team worker* – someone who thinks about the people in the group, the caring person
- *A specialist* who has vital specific knowledge and skills.

Usually people are clearly strong in one role or another; however, most people can take on other roles as well. What is important for effective teams is that there is a balance between 'thinkers' and 'doers'.

What factors determine the effectiveness of the team?

Team composition: Careful consideration should be placed on factors such as personality, interests, age and backgrounds when forming a team. If the members of a team think along the same lines then they will usually work together effectively.

Team development/cohesiveness: Often, a group which has worked together before, will know one another well, jelling quickly and identifying themselves as a team early on. Teams develop through a number of stages. Early on in the process shared sets of standards and values are agreed and adopted by the group – once this happens a team will work as a cohesive group and pull together.

Nature of the task: Team effectiveness is often affected by the task being faced, for example, how clearly structured the task is, how challenging and whether the team believe in it or not. This is linked to the resources the team is given to do the job (time, equipment, budget, etc.) and whether the team have been involved in agreeing these things. The clearer the task, and the more involved the members feel, the more effectively the team will work.

Team maintenance/environment: It is important that the people who belong to a team identify themselves as part of a team and are given opportunities to develop as a team. Virtual teams (members work remotely from one another) need to be brought together every now and then to maintain relationships and their feeling of identity. Teams need to be given the right environment to be able to work together which includes being sited together in the workplace and being given opportunities to take part in activities both inside and out of the workplace, which develop their relationship as a team.

Outcome 1

Leadership: One of the essential components of effective teams is appropriate leadership. A leader can be described as someone who influences others towards the achievement of goals. Instead of having to coerce followers to achieve a task, a good leader will motivate people to willingly work towards their goals. He or she will do this by such means as:

- setting a clear vision or goals for the team
- meeting the needs of the team (information, communication, etc.)
- meeting the needs of the individuals within the team (support, training, etc.)
- meeting the needs of the task in hand (resources, use of team skills, etc.)
- liaising between the team, management and other work areas.

A good leader will deploy team skills effectively, ensure conflict is kept to a minimum and that communication is open and constructive. Good leaders involve their team in decision-making and listen to ideas on the best way to achieve the task. They encourage a sense of team ownership and commitment to the task and the organisation – ensuring that the job gets done but also ensuring that the team has a sense of satisfaction in doing it.

The kind of leadership required by a team will depend on a number of factors – whether it is a new or established team, how effective the team is and how complex the task is, etc. A directing leader is more necessary in a less experienced, less effective team, however, more experienced or effective teams will often need a leader who is more a coordinator of activity and provider of resources as they will need less direction. The more effective a team is, the more the members will interact with one another and take on roles to support one another – there is less need for a leader to direct operations, but rather to pull things together and support the activity.

To summarise, effective teams:

- develop a relaxed atmosphere
- allow relevant discussion with participation of all
- demonstrate clear commitment to objectives
- allow members listen to one another
- discuss conflicts openly and deal with criticism constructively
- reach decisions by consensus
- encourage a climate where ideas are freely expressed
- allow leadership to be shared
- promote a climate where members will evaluate themselves.

Outcome 1

Benefits to individuals and the organisation of effective team working

There are clear benefits to both the organisation and to individuals in adopting a team-based approach to work:

Risk-taking: Often, groups will take more risks than individuals working alone. This can be an advantage for organisations where calculated risks can pay off and give that organisation a competitive edge. For individuals, the ability to share the risk encourages them to try out ideas, which they might not have tried as an individual.
Pooled resources: 'Two heads are better than one.' Bringing people together, with the variety of knowledge and skills they possess will generate more ideas and solve more problems than using individuals separately. Exchange of ideas and shared skills benefits the organisation in terms of creativity, it is also of benefit to the individuals involved for their learning and development, which in turn increases motivation.

Morale and motivation: Effective teamwork often brings the individuals concerned a greater sense of involvement, development and achievement. In turn this can improve job satisfaction, morale and motivation. Increased employee motivation benefits the organisation through improved efficiency and productivity.

Multi-skilling: Effective teams are multi-skilled and in the absence of one member, can quickly cover their duties between them. The advantage to the organisation is obvious.

Responsibility: Effective teams are often self-directing and self-monitoring and take on responsibility for their activity. Effective teams need less supervision and management, which allows for organisations to remove layers of management, whilst the team members benefit from increased self-management and responsibility.

OUTCOME 2

Outcome 2
Describe the impact of changing working practices on the modern working environment

Working practices

If you were to look at how organisations carried out their activities just 15 years ago, the picture would seem very different from today. Employees held either permanent full-time or permanent part-time contracts and carried out their work almost entirely on the organisation’s premises.

Today things look very different and organisations use a wide range of employment contracts and working practices to carry out their operations. These changes are due to a number of factors including:

New technology – particularly the Internet which has made communication and exchange of information easy, fast and relatively cheap.

Competition – the highly competitive business environment has forced organisations to streamline their activities and adopt working practices which are as cost-effective as possible.

Social trends – the changing needs and demands of the workforce have influenced organisations to adopt more flexible working practices. Social legislation (The Flexible Working Regulations 2002), reflecting changes in social trends has also forced changes in the workplace.

Impact of different working practices on the individual and the organisation

Different working practices that organisations might operate include:

Terms of contract	Permanent, temporary, fixed-term, casual
Working hours	Full-time, part-time, flexi-time, job-share
Mode of work	Office-based, home-based, tele-working, hot-desking

Outcome 2

In addition, organisations might choose to **outsource** whole areas of its operations (for example, marketing, recruitment or payroll services). In this instance they contract another organisation to deliver a service or particular skill rather than employ and train staff of their own.

Another area where employers have introduced more flexibility in the workplace is through the use of **career breaks,** whereby employees with a certain length of service take time out from their career to pursue other interests or family commitments. At the end of the agreed period, the employee will return to their position in the organisation. Employers have realised that there are advantages to holding on to able, experienced staff and, rather than lose them permanently, employers are increasingly agreeing to these temporary breaks in employment.

Case loading has also been adopted in some organisations to replace the more traditional 9 to 5, 5-days-a-week approach. A shift in emphasis means the completion of a given workload is considered more important than working a set number of hours in a day. Therefore, where it is considered that the overall work of the organisation will not suffer, employees are often allowed to adopt more flexible working patterns.

Impact of flexible working practices on the organisation

- Short-term contracts can be used to employ staff only when they are needed (especially useful in businesses where demand for their goods/services is seasonal). In addition, organisations can buy in specialist skills for short-term projects without incurring the need for training/re-skilling of their existing staff.

- Organisations can retain workers whose personal circumstances have changed (e.g. new mothers/fathers) rather than lose the knowledge and skills of these experienced workers. Consequently, there is no need to recruit and train new employees.

- Savings can be made in terms of occupying building space.

- By increasing the choice of working methods to suit employees' lifestyles, the organisation will benefit from better morale, motivation and productivity.

- Outsourcing of services to specialist firms can be cost effective, despite the possible loss of control over a particular area of work.

Outcome 2

Impact on employees

- Greater choice and flexibility to suit changing needs and lifestyle
- Question of security of job if contracts are increasingly of a temporary or fixed-term nature – implications for, e.g. pensions, ability to get mortgage, etc.

The work environment

Have you ever heard of buildings being sick? Researchers have found a phenomenon called 'sick building syndrome' – i.e. employees believe that the building they work in makes them unwell. This is often a result of poor layout, ventilation, lighting or even décor.

The science of **ergonomics** has attempted to look at the office environment, and its impact on the individual. Many organisations have re-designed the work environment, placing more emphasis on factors such as employee health and work productivity.

Office layout

Organisations now design their workplaces not only to suit the workflow requirements, but also with the needs of their employees in mind.

There are two main choices of office layout – **cellular** or **open plan.**

Cellular layout

This type of layout consists of individual offices. The advantages and disadvantages of this form of layout are listed below:

Advantages	**Disadvantages**
Privacy	Wastes space
Status	Cannot share resources, e.g. printers
Quiet – can close the door	Employees may feel isolated
Difficult to supervise activity	Uneconomic, e.g. lighting/heating
Can regulate heat/light to suit own needs	

Outcome 2

Open plan
An open-plan layout can be totally open (without any kind of partition of space at all) or 'landscaped', which is more often the case. Landscaped layouts will use plants, furniture and partitions/screens to create work areas within one large space. The advantages and disadvantages of this type of layout are shown below:

Advantages	Disadvantages
Less wasted space	Can be noisy
Easy to supervise	Lacks privacy
Can be designed to suit workflow and work groups	Does not give status of 'own office'
Resources can be shared, e.g. printer/copier	Can't regulate heat/light to individual needs
Staff do not feel isolated – sociable layout	

No matter which layout an organisation chooses, it must ensure the correct workflow.

Workflow describes the flow of people and paper around the office. If the layout leads to unnecessary movement around the building and results in delays, hold-ups and frustration then there is a problem of design. Good design principles include:

- Site associated work areas together, e.g. sales and purchasing;
- No unnecessary physical barriers to get from A to B;
- Common services/equipment sited centrally for all to use.

In addition, the layout chosen should meet the needs of the employees who have to work in it. Open-plan layouts should be landscaped to ensure the disadvantages of this kind of layout are minimised and the advantages maximised. For example, built-in private areas, use of ergonomically designed furniture to allow privacy (e.g. desk dividers, modesty panels) location of grouped workspaces to house teams/ sections together.

Outcome 2

Ergonomic environment

A good working environment will often have been ergonomically designed and take account of individual needs, including health and safety issues. Features of this will include:

- *Systems furniture* – desks/chairs that adjust to fit work/equipment/ individual requirements
- *Wall colours* which are relaxing, minimise glare, and please the eye
- *Lighting* – non-glare, desk-top lamps where appropriate
- *Ventilation* – good circulation or air, but no draughts
- *Noise control* – appropriate choice of glazing, walls and floor coverings to reduce noise
- *Workstations* which ensure privacy and ownership of space
- *Protective equipment* for use with ICT, e.g. wrist-rests, anti-glare screens.

A well-designed, well laid-out ergonomic work environment reduces the risk of 'sick-building' syndrome and has a huge impact on both the individual and the organisation:

- improves morale and motivation and helps productivity
- ensures effective flow of work
- promotes health and safety at work
- gives a positive image for the organisation
- can be cost-effective as a result of the above.

Workplace legislation

The main piece of legislation governing health and safety at work in Britain is the **Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 (HASWA),** which was updated by the **Workplace (Health and Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992.**

This act provides broad statements in relation to minimum health and safety requirements and places legal responsibilities on both employers and employees:

Employers – must do all they can to provide a safe and secure workplace. The act covers factors such as minimum space requirements, heat, light, provision of facilities (toilets, etc.), first aid, provision and maintenance of equipment, storage, accidents and provision of health and safety information and training.

Employees – must cooperate with health and safety policies and take all reasonable care of themselves and others. Examples of specific employee responsibilities include safe use of equipment, wearing of provided protective clothing, attending training sessions, reporting potential or actual hazards and preventing accidents.

The Health and Safety at Work Act is what is known as an **'umbrella'** act which means it contains a number of other acts, each covering specific aspects of heath and safety. It is also known as an **'enabling'** act which means that it allows for any new acts or amendments to acts to be added.

Outcome 2

The most prominent other pieces of legislation contained in the Health and Safety at Work Act are:

- Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR) 1995. This deals with the reporting of injuries and accidents at work (serious and fatal)

- Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992. This covers safe use of VDUs in the workplace

- Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) 1994. This deals with storage and control of hazardous substances and items such as protective equipment and clothing.

In addition to the above legislative requirements, in 1993 six European Health and Safety directives were enforced in Britain. These became known as the **'Six-Pack',** and covered many aspects of health and safety legislation; however, there were two main additions:

- the requirement for risk assessment and monitoring by employers – it is now the duty of employers to carry out a written assessment of all risks in the workplace, identify hazards involved and outline actions to eliminate or minimise the risks

- increased worker participation.

Communicating health and safety regulations
Part of an employer's responsibility is to provide information on health and safety to its employees. In fact, by law, any organisation employing more than five staff must produce a **written health and safety policy,** which must be issued to its staff.

Most organisations will produce their own company set of policies and procedures for health and safety – the Health and Safety at Work Act provides only **minimum** standards and many organisations exceed these.

There are a number of ways organisations ensure information is communicated:

- *Induction training* – new employees receive a copy of a company's health and safety policy and may be given familiarisation sessions, e.g. fire-drill procedures
- *On -going training* – this might include safe use of equipment, safe lifting and handling
- *Use of notices* – this could include posting fire alarm procedures, caution signs, no-smoking signs
- *Demonstrations* – such as first aid, fire drills, evacuation simulations
- *Organisational handbook* – this is usually distributed to staff or made readily available and usually includes health and safety policies and procedures

Outcome 2

- *Advice sessions* – either from the organisation's health and safety officer or from outside agencies for specific issues
- *Intranet* – for accessing health and safety information
- *Introducing a health and safety representative* – who should be available for advice and who will provide information on all aspects of health and safety.

Of course, whilst it is a legal requirement for organisations to provide information, it is also an obligation of the employee to ensure it is read and complied with.

Consequences of breaches of health and safety legislation and procedures

The organisation

The two organisations responsible for enforcing workplace health and safety legislation are the national **Health and Safety Executive (HSE)** and local government **Environmental Health** departments.

Inspectors representing the above bodies can visit organisations at any time, with or without warning, and have the power to:

- provide advice
- issue warnings, including notice to improve (within a fixed time)
- immediately shut down operations without notice.

Penalties for organisations who fail to comply with the above can include fines or even imprisonment.

In addition, employees who believe that the organisation has breached health and safety requirements can take their case to an **Industrial Tribunal.** Examples might be the non-provision of safety equipment/ protective clothing or failure to remedy a reported hazard, which has resulted in subsequent injury. If a case is proven against the employer, it may result in fines, or compensation to the employee.

Employees

Examples of employees failing to comply with health and safety policies and procedures may include behaving in a dangerous manner towards others, smoking in designated non-smoking areas or even refusing to wear provided safety clothing. Depending on the severity and nature of the incident, employees will usually be dealt with through the company's disciplinary procedures, which might include:

- a verbal warning
- a written warning
- summary dismissal
- referral to the police
- civil and criminal prosecution.

Outcome 2

The issue of health and safety is a very serious one for both employers and employees and failure to comply with either legislation or organisational procedures can result in heavy penalties for all concerned.

OUTCOME 3

Outcome 3
Describe procedures and processes involved in recruiting, developing and supporting staff

Recruitment and selection

Activities performed by the Human Resources department of an organisation include recruitment and selection, staff development and staff support.

All organisations experience a certain turnover of staff, whether expected (e.g. retirements) or unexpected (e.g. resignations), and will have developed recruitment and selection procedures for this purpose.

It is important to understand, however, what is meant by recruitment and selection. Often these terms are used interchangeably when in fact they are two separate processes.

Recruitment is the process of attracting people to apply for a job.

Selection is the process of sorting and selecting a suitable employee from the applicants.

The recruitment process

Before any recruitment takes place, the organisation will usually first ask the question of whether the vacancy needs to be filled and if so, if the job itself will remain the same or change. Once decided, the structure of the job will be detailed in a **Job Description/Specification.** This will include details about:

- the job title
- the location/department
- who the job holder is responsible to; and who they are responsible for
- the main purpose of the job
- relationships both internal and external to the organisation
- specific duties and responsibilities
- any other duties.

Not only does this document help the recruitment process but it is a legal requirement that a new post holder is given a written copy of his/ her job description within the first 8 weeks of their employment.

In addition to the Job Description a **Person Specification** is also drawn up outlining the knowledge, skills and personal attributes needed to do the job.

The Person Specification should categorise the requirements of the job as either **essential** or **desirable.** This information will then be used in the recruitment and selection process, providing a way of measuring candidates against the requirements of the job and against each other.

Outcome 3

The next stage is to inform potential applicants of the vacancy. This is achieved by one of four methods.

- **Internal advertising –** e.g. notices on staff bulletin boards, staff newsletters or the company intranet. This is less costly than external advertising and can motivate and encourage existing employees whilst using the 'home-grown' talent within the organisation.

- **External advertising –** e.g. local or national newspapers, specialist journals and magazines, or company website. Although this can be a costly process, it ensures 'new blood' is brought into the organisation.

- **Direct recruitment –** also known as 'head-hunting' whereby an organisation will directly invite someone to apply for a job.

- **Recruitment agencies –** although using an agency can be costly, it may save time and has the advantage of using the expertise of the agency's staff.

The aim of the recruitment process is to attract the right kind of applicant and in sufficient numbers. The success of this will depend on various factors:

- whether accurate/essential information has been included in the information issued
- whether the right groups of people have been targeted.

The selection process

At the end of the recruitment process, applicants will have forwarded their details to the organisation in a format which will depend on how they were asked to apply. It is at this stage that selection can begin and it is important that this is done correctly in order that the right person is found for the job. Selection methods available to organisations include:

- **Application forms or letters –** usually the first stage of selection, which leads to further selection methods.

Advantages	**Disadvantages**
Easy to use and match against job criteria.	Doesn't give a real feel for the person.
Can be designed to ensure all relevant information is asked for.	Not always accurate – candidate can lie, leave things out.
Selectors see candidate's powers of written expression.	Could be completed by someone else.

Outcome 3

- **Curriculum Vitae (CV) –** a document that summarises personal details; education and qualifications; employment history; hobbies and interests; referees.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Can provide a good personal overview of the applicant.	Not always accurate – candidate may lie, exaggerate, leave things out.
Selectors can assess candidate's writing skills.	May have been completed or tidied up by someone else.

- **Tests –** there are a number of different tests which can be used to assess candidate suitability; however, whichever ones are used, great care must be taken to ensure they are appropriate, valid (do they actually test what they need to test?) and reliable in their results (do they give the same results when repeated?).

Tests can include:

– **practical tests (e.g.** bricklaying or word processing) which check actual competence in skills necessary for the job
– **medical tests –** health and strength may be an essential requirement
– **general ability** or **aptitude tests** which may test the ability to learn or adapt if there are new skills to be developed in the job
– **personality tests** which look at traits, behaviour or attitudes and indicate whether a person is suitable and would be successful in the post.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Can check the validity of candidate's skills.	Candidate's performance may be uncharacteristic, e.g. affected by nerves.
Can give comparison of levels of skills between candidates.	If not well designed, can discriminate against some candidates, e.g. use of local vocabulary or terms may disadvantage non-local candidates.
If used together can give an all-round picture of the candidate.	Personality tests can be unreliable if not administered by trained personnel.

These days, many organisations are using **psychometric tests** which take the form of questionnaires and are aimed at assessing aptitudes and personality. These tests are accredited by the British Psychological Society and must be administered by trained personnel – they have an extremely high rate of validity and reliability as selection methods.

Outcome 3

- **Interview –** This is the most common form of selection and is often the method which carries most weight – yet they can be very unreliable if not carried out properly.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Gives opportunity to meet candidates face to face.	Can be subjective – decisions can be based on first impressions, how people look, their accent, etc.
Gives opportunity to probe and question further any points of interest on the application form.	Interviewers may be biased, e.g. influenced by factors such as family connections, 'old school tie', etc.
Gives opportunity to ask 'what if?' scenarios.	Factors outwith the candidate's control may impair her/his performance, e.g. poor questions, poor interviewer, environment, interruptions.
Gives applicant the opportunity to ask questions/assess the organisation also.	May not give equal chance to candidates if not all asked the same questions.

It is essential that interviews are carried out correctly to ensure they are both valid and reliable and there are a number of ways to ensure this is achieved:

- use trained interviewers and prepare well for the interview
- have more than one person interviewing to get a number of opinions
- structure the interview – sequence should include a welcome, time to acquire information, time to give information, confirmation of next stage
- design questions appropriately – closed questions should only be used to confirm or clarify information. Open questions should be used to gain opinions/examples from the candidate and allow opportunity for them to present themselves. Probing or follow-up questions should also be used to draw all the information out of a candidate
- use the person specification and a scoring system as a guide to measure candidates against and ensure all are measured against the same criteria **(criterion-based interviewing)**
- **references** are usually used as a back-up selection method. They are often used to confirm a decision at interview and jobs can be offered 'subject to references'.

Of course, organisations will rarely use only one selection technique – most will use a combination such as application forms and interviews. The use of **assessment centres** by organisations is growing. This is where the short-listed candidates are gathered for one or more days and undergo a number of selection processes, which could include interviews, tests, role-plays, group discussions, etc. Whilst these are very costly and are mostly used for senior management posts, they have proved very reliable.

Outcome 3

An administrator working in a Human Resources Department may well be involved in the recruitment and selection process, organising such things as correspondence, production of documents (job and person specs, short leets, etc.), placing of advertisements and organising the tests/interview days and may even be involved in showing candidates around etc. It is important that he or she is familiar with how these processes work, understands the stages involved and is aware of the legislation surrounding this area.

Staff development and support

The success of an organisation depends largely on the quality and focus of its staff and an effective organisation will develop and support its employees to improve their knowledge and skills and work towards achieving company objectives.

Staff Development and Performance Management is one way in which organisations attempt to develop and improve the quality of their staff and may be carried out formally or informally. Formal processes might include:

Performance management

- **Appraisal systems** can be used as part of performance management and are designed to **measure and assess, rate and record** employee performance. In many organisations, there has been employee resistance to the introduction of appraisal systems for a number of reasons; however, most organisations will now have one form or another in place.

Early examples of appraisal systems had serious problems and led to employee resistance, because the systems:

– tended to be imposed and carried out by management with little employee input
– were simple rating methods against broad factors such as loyalty leadership, quality of work, and scoring was often very subjective
– could only be used for indicating weaknesses rather than identifying opportunities for improvements – did not set targets
– were often used for apportioning blame rather than improving staff performance.

These days, most appraisal systems are more participative and will involve:

– an annual review of performance
– a two-way discussion in which both employee and employer are evaluated
– paper-based rating of performance
– face-to-face interview or discussion of rating and performance
– setting of targets and discussion of development needs to achieve these
– subsequent feedback on performance.

Outcome 3

Examples of some widely used appraisal methods are:

- **Management by objectives (MBO) –** this emphasises setting of agreed targets by both the employer and the employee, in line with organisational goals. Using this method, performance is then measured against these targets, development needs identified and targets set.

- **Competency-based method –** unlike the MBO method which only measures *what* has been achieved (the final output), this method also emphasises the importance of assessing *how* the work is carried out. This is particularly useful in areas of work that are less easy to measure such as customer service.

- **360° method –** unlike other methods which have a 'top-down' approach (i.e. it is the employer who has the main role in evaluating the employee) this method uses a variety of people in the assessment process – these could include superiors, subordinates, peers and even customers – to help build an overall profile by a third party (usually the HR manager). The profile is then fed back and development needs and targets identified.

Whichever method is used, appraisal must be:

- objective
- participative
- considered
- developmental.

Training and development

Performance Management and Staff Development go hand in hand – but without the provision of training and development, organisations cannot expect improved performance from their staff. There are two ways in which organisations seek to improve employee effectiveness:

- **training/re-training** for specific skills and knowledge. Training usually takes place for a particular purpose and has an immediate need, i.e. learning how to operate a new piece of equipment/ software. This can include on- and off-the-job training.

- **development** of existing/new skills and knowledge – this tends to be broader than training and is more about fine-tuning or expanding current knowledge and understanding or developing for future needs and aspirations, e.g. those wishing to go into management may undertake management development courses in which the theories of management practice are shared and discussed.

Outcome 3

Most organisations will offer training and development as part of planned staff development programmes and which can be carried out in two ways:

- **in-house –** on the organisation's premises, either by external providers or its own staff.

- **external –** outwith the organisation's premises, e.g. at a local college or training centre.

The decision of which to use will depend on factors such as cost, availability of specialist trainers, etc. Most organisations tend to deliver development sessions (such as updates on company procedures/ changes in the business sector) themselves. Indeed, many organisations have their own ICT training facilities; however, training for formal qualifications (HNC, HNDs, etc.) or specialised training is usually carried out externally.

Continuous professional development

Employers have realised that training and development cannot be completed well on an ad-hoc basis but must be a planned, consistent and integrated process linked to the achievement of organisational aims and objectives. In a fast-moving business environment, there is more and more need for employees to continually develop themselves in order for the business to remain competitive.

Continuous professional development (or CPD) is now often a requirement of employment and it is the responsibility of both the employer (to provide opportunity for development) and the employee (to make use of it). Formal CPD is recorded and used as part of the annual performance appraisal.

The government's **Lifelong Learning** agenda, which encourages continuous training and development, has influenced approaches to training and development in all organisations. Organisations are often set training targets, can receive funding and are generally encouraged to develop their staff.

Staff-support systems

Training and development is just one way in which organisations can support staff to do their job; however, organisations have also realised the importance of supporting staff in terms of their welfare at work as this also has an effect on staff motivation and effectiveness. Organisations use a number of policies and procedures to do this:

- **counselling –** organisations attempt to support staff by offering counselling services on a range of issues such as stress, health and careers. This might be undertaken by trained company staff; however, organisations are increasingly contracting external specialist counselling services who offer anonymous and confidential services, whilst ensuring the organisation is aware of the number of staff using the service in order to highlight stress levels etc.

Outcome 3

- **advice –** organisations will offer advice to employees on such matters as employment and health and safety legislation. Employees will have access to written company policies and procedures; however, it is also often necessary to provide explanation and advice on these areas. This can be done through Human Resources or Personnel staff or trade union representatives. Examples of the types of advice most commonly offered are maternity and paternity rights, grievance and disciplinary procedures or rights to time off.

- **grievance procedures –** organisations will normally have grievance and disciplinary procedures in place which aim to help resolve any difficulties between employer and employees within the workplace. Whilst disciplinary procedures deal with employee misconduct, grievance procedures provide a formal mechanism and support by which employees can take action if they feel they are being unfairly treated at work. This usually takes the form of a formal written document stating the different stages a grievance might go through, the personnel involved and the outcomes they can expect.

- **return-to-work interviews –** most organisations will have policies on absence and illness and it is common for employees to receive advice and counselling upon returning to work after a prolonged absence. Many organisations operate a planned, gradual return to work for employees returning after extended absence and even use occupational health staff for support purposes.

- **family-friendly policies –** more and more organisations are realising the importance of flexibility in working practices. This includes supporting staff in balancing work and home responsibilities. Organisations have official policies and procedures in place for allowing such concessions as paid/unpaid paternity leave and time off for family events/issues. Some organisations even have what have become known as ‘duvet-days’ – these are days when staff may not be able to face the office for a number of reasons, but are not ill. Indeed, many organisations now operate flexi-time and hot-desking work practices where the emphasis isn’t on 9 to 5 any more, but on staff completing the required work.

  In addition, organisations may offer a number of ‘extras’ at work. These can include such benefits as corporate membership of health clubs, corporate cinema passes, ‘employee of the week’ rewards, discounts at various outlets, etc.

OUTCOME 4

Outcome 4
Explain how formal meetings are planned, conducted and supported

Purpose of meetings

Meeting = a gathering together of people for a purpose *(Collins English Dictionary)*

In this day and age of high-tech communications some people may argue that there should be no need for meetings. In response to this argument, however, many people would consider that whenever individuals are required to work and cooperate with each other, it becomes necessary for those involved to meet.

In reality, meetings are an essential part of business life. They provide an opportunity for people to have face-to-face discussion for the exchange of information and views, the delegation of tasks and responsibilities, and a shared approach to problem solving and decision-making. This can often produce better ideas, plans and decisions than a number of individuals working alone.

It is often argued that meetings can waste a lot of time and perhaps not achieve a great deal. The first rule of effective meetings is that if a meeting is not necessary, then it should not be held. It is often the case that a letter, a memo, a telephone call or a simple conversation between two people can resolve problems.

Outcome 4

Examples of when a meeting may be required are given below:

- where persuasion or encouragement is required
- where the exchange of ideas is required or a problem needs solved
- where there is a significant amount of information to be given to a number of people.

If it is decided that a meeting is necessary then it is must be well organised and well run to ensure it is effective. This is why the role of the Secretary and the role of the Chairperson are vitally important for a successful meeting.

Meetings fall into two categories – informal meetings and formal meetings.

Informal meetings

Informal meetings are frequently held in business and can range from two members of staff talking at coffee break about a topic related to their work, to the weekly meeting of a Sales Team to discuss sales figures – this type of Team Meeting is very common in business.

Informal meetings differ from formal ones as they take place without any specified procedures or rules being followed. A group leader often leads the meeting rather than a Chairperson and notes of the meeting may not always be required.

Formal meetings

The administrative assistant usually plays a role (often as secretary) at formal business meetings.

Formal meetings are normally held for a specific purpose and at regular intervals, e.g. the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of a public limited company which has to be held by law, or a Board Meeting.

Formal meetings tend to be very procedure conscious and have to follow certain rules and regulations. The rules and regulations may be set out in a formal document known as a **Constitution.**

Minutes (formal notes) of the meeting will require to be taken and kept as a record of what was discussed and what was decided during the meeting (these are looked at in more detail later).

The following notes refer to the formal meetings an administrator would be involved in organising, supporting and recording.

Types of meetings and committees

The most common types of formal meetings in business are as follows:

Outcome 4

Annual General Meeting – all public limited companies must hold an annual meeting to which all shareholders are invited. The AGM is required by law (a statutory meeting) and the regulations are laid down in the Companies Acts. The AGM gives shareholders the opportunity to discuss the performance of the company during the year, discuss the future plans and elect office bearers for the coming year.

Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) – a meeting open to all shareholders, normally called to discuss special business which cannot be held over until the next AGM, e.g. a rival company wants to buy the business.

Board Meeting – the business of a limited company is managed between AGMs by its Board of Directors. The Directors hold board meetings at which company policy is discussed and determined.

The Board of Directors can delegate powers and duties to a Committee or Committees, which are formed to carry out certain tasks and report back to the Board.

Types of committee

Executive Committee – has the ability to make decisions, which are binding (the company has to accept them). The Board of Directors is an example of such a committee.

Advisory Committee – created to look at certain issues and make recommendations to the Board of Directors, e.g. whether the company should expand into a particular market.

Joint Committee – formed to coordinate the activities of two or more committees, either temporarily or permanently. Such a committee can help to improve communications between committees.

Standing Committee – permanently in existence to deal with certain matters which have been assigned to it, e.g. a local council will have standing committees to deal with finance and housing.

Ad-hoc Committee – formed for a particular task, e.g. to plan a special event such as a retirement dinner. Having achieved its purpose it then ceases to exist.

Sub-committee – formed as part of another committee to look at a particular aspect, e.g. to organise a fund-raising event. A sub-committee can be either standing or ad hoc.

Organisation's procedures – legal and regulatory requirements

Formal meetings have to comply with various legal requirements. For example, statutory meetings, such as the Annual General Meeting and an Extraordinary General Meeting, have to be run in accordance with the regulations laid down by the Companies Acts.

Outcome 4

To ensure that a meeting is valid (legal), it is important for it to be:

- properly convened – this means that the relevant notice must be given to every person entitled to attend
- properly constituted – the Chairperson (or accepted substitute) must be present and a suitable quorum (minimum number of people allowed to attend) must be present
- held in accordance with the rules and regulations governing the conduct of meetings of the particular organisation – these are set out in:
  – a company's Articles of Association
  – a club's Constitution
  – a local authority's Standing Orders.

Election of office bearers

The election of the office bearers of a company should be in accordance with the Articles of Association. Office bearers are usually appointed or reappointed at the AGM. Nominations for each position will be proposed and seconded. Where more than one person is nominated then a vote will be taken.

Roles and responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of the main office bearers at a meeting are as follows.

Office bearer	Brief summary of role
Chairperson	The Chairperson is responsible for keeping order at a meeting and generally taking charge of the meeting.
Secretary	This would be part of the role of an Administrative Assistant. The Secretary provides administrative support.
Treasurer	Responsible for preparing financial reports and presenting this information at the meeting. In business the Finance Director or Chief Accountant would perform this role.

Chairperson

It can be argued that the Chairperson is the most important person at a meeting. The Chairperson's role is to take charge of the meeting. If the meeting is not chaired properly then it may not achieve what it set out to achieve. By looking at the responsibilities of the Chairperson you will be able to appreciate the importance of this position.

Outcome 4

The Chairperson's responsibilities include the following:

- to make sure that the meeting is set up and run according to the rules of the organisation – the Chairperson must be completely familiar with the organisation's **Standing Orders** (the rules concerning the organisation and running of meetings) in case there is a dispute about procedure

- to ensure that the previous Minutes are a correct record – the Chairperson must liaise with the Secretary before the meeting to ensure that the Minutes of the previous meeting have been prepared and checked

- to start the meeting punctually

- to sign the Minutes as a correct record once all members of the Committee present at the meeting have agreed – this happens towards the start of the meeting

- to work consistently through the Agenda explaining clearly the item being discussed

- to try to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and that discussion is kept to the point – the Chairperson needs to prevent over-talkative members from holding the floor and encourage quieter members to have their say

- to ensure that all who speak address the Chair (talk to the meeting as a whole by raising points through the Chairperson rather than talking directly to the other members) – it would be very difficult to keep order if several different conversations were going on at the one time

- to decide when discussion has gone on long enough and sum up conclusions reached in an unbiased manner

- to put matters to the vote (when necessary), declare the results of voting and summarise decisions so that they can be recorded properly – no one should be left in any doubt as to what has been agreed

- to close or adjourn a meeting formally

- to make decisions, usually in consultation with the Secretary, between meetings and generally act on behalf of the Committee

- to take any appropriate follow-up action required, as agreed

- to liaise with the Secretary regarding the preparation of the draft Minutes and the next Agenda.

Outcome 4

A good Chairperson is one who is competent, tactful, impartial and firm but fair. Some people argue that the ability to be a good Chairperson is natural and others that it is a skill that must be learned.

Secretary

The Chairperson is not the only person responsible for the smooth running and success of a meeting. It can be argued that the Secretary is equally important.

The Secretary has certain tasks that should be completed before, during and after a meeting to ensure that his/her role is carried out properly.

The amount of work involved will depend upon several factors:
- the reason for calling the meeting
- the type of meeting (e.g. formal or informal)
- the number of people who are likely to attend
- the venue.

There is a considerable difference between organising an AGM at a large hotel and arranging for six members of a department to meet in the office for half an hour!

Duties of the secretary before a meeting

As Secretary to a meeting you should:

- book the venue/accommodation for the meeting – this will be determined by the type of meeting and whether it is to be held internally (on the business premises) or externally (e.g. in a hotel or conference centre). Always confirm the booking in writing. Allow extra time both before and after the meeting as this gives you the chance before the meeting to check the room is tidy and organised the way you want it and provides for the meeting over-running

- note in your diary the date, time, place and nature of the meeting

- open a file for the meeting into which can be placed papers or notes of items in connection with the meeting

Outcome 4

- draft a Notice of Meeting and Agenda and present it to the Chairperson for approval

- prepare and distribute the approved Notice of Meeting and Agenda to those members entitled to attend. Attach any additional papers, which are to be sent out, and the minutes of the last meeting if these have not been circulated previously

- make extra copies of the Agenda, any additional papers and the Minutes of the last meeting for back-up at the actual meeting

- carefully note any apologies for absence that are received. The Chairperson may wish you to obtain statements or documents from members who cannot be present but whose knowledge or opinions would have been sought

- arrange for name cards if the people present are not known to each other and organise a seating plan as necessary

- arrange, as appropriate, refreshments, audio visual aids, car parking spaces and special needs requirements such as wheelchair access

- prepare the Chairperson's Agenda

- place a copy of the Minutes of the previous meeting in the Minute Book ready for the Chairperson's signature during the meeting

- have an Attendance Register (Sederunt) or sheet prepared for completion at the meeting – this is particularly important if a large attendance is expected

- make sure that there are stocks of pencils, paper and notebooks. Look out documents or files which may require to be referred to at the meeting

- notify the press if the meeting is a public one, or if it is appropriate that a report should appear in the newspaper.

Duties of the secretary on the day of the meeting (before the meeting starts)

As Secretary you should:

- ensure that Reception is aware of the meeting and provide Reception with a list of those attending – this is particularly useful if guests are expected

- put up direction signs to the meeting room

- place a 'Meeting in Progress' notice on the door

Outcome 4

- check the room before the meeting to ensure that it is organised the way you want it and that there is suitable heating, lighting and ventilation
- check that water jugs, glasses, stationery and audiovisual aids are in position and that refreshments will be served at an appropriate time
- confirm the parking arrangements
- arrange with the switchboard to re-route calls or take messages whilst the meeting is in progress
- collect all necessary files and documents which may be called upon during the meeting, including the attendance register, and spare copies of the Agenda and Minutes of the previous meeting
- greet people on arrival at the meeting.

Duties of the secretary on the day of the meeting (during the meeting)

As Secretary you should:

- read the Minutes of the previous meeting, letters of apology and any other correspondence
- ensure that the Chairperson signs the previous Minutes and signs any alterations
- assist the Chairperson throughout the meeting with files, papers, Agenda, etc.
- take notes summarising all the proceedings at the meeting so that the Minutes can be drafted after the meeting *or* write down the action to be taken, by whom and for what date if only Action Minutes are required
- make a separate note of any action to be taken by you and/or the Chairperson
- check that all those present have signed the Attendance Register.

Outcome 4

Duties of secretary after the meeting

As Secretary you should:

- remove the ‘Meeting in Progress’ sign and direction signs
- clear the room and leave it tidy. Check that no one has left anything behind
- if necessary, notify the catering staff that they may collect the unused refreshments
- notify the switchboard that the meeting has finished
- draft the Minutes of the meeting as soon after the meeting as possible when the discussion is still fresh in your mind and then check the draft Minutes with the Chairperson
- send out the agreed Minutes before the next meeting or keep the Minutes aside to be sent out with the next Notice of Meeting and Agenda for the next meeting
- prepare a note of any issues to be dealt with by the Chairperson and pass it to the Chairperson
- remind any members who have agreed to take any action following on from the meeting
- record the date and any other important information about the next meeting in the Chairperson’s diary and your diary – if electronic diaries are used you may be responsible for updating the diaries of relevant members
- make a note in your diary to remind you when the next Notice of Meeting and Agenda should be sent out for the next meeting
- begin to draft the Agenda for the next meeting
- attend to any necessary correspondence and prepare thank you letters, as appropriate, for the Chairperson’s signature.

Outcome 4

Terms used in the conduct of meetings

There are many terms used during the course of a formal meeting. To be able to contribute to the meeting you need to understand what these terms mean. Examples of terminology are given below:

Term	Definition
ABSTAIN	Where a member refrains from voting either in favour of or against a motion.
ADDRESS THE CHAIR	Where a member wishes to speak they must go through the Chairperson, e.g. 'Madam Chairperson' or 'Mr Chairman'.
ADJOURNMENT	If a meeting is running out of time it may be necessary to adjourn the meeting until a later date.
AMENDMENT	This is a change to a proposed motion by the addition, deletion or modification of words. An amendment must be proposed, seconded and voted upon in the usual way.
BALLOT	A written vote with provision for preserving secrecy of each individual's vote.
CASTING VOTE	An additional vote, usually held by the Chairperson, to enable a decision to be made if the votes when counted are equally 'for' and 'against' a motion.
MAJORITY	The greater number of members either vote 'for' or 'against' a motion.
MOTION	A proposal moved by a member suggesting the way forward. This should be discussed at a meeting.
POINT OF ORDER	A query raised by a member regarding the procedure at a meeting or a query relating to the standing orders or constitution, e.g. absence of a quorum.
POSTPONE	Delaying an item on the agenda for a future meeting or temporarily holding off a meeting until another time.
PROPOSER	The member putting forward a motion for discussion at a meeting.
QUORUM	This is the minimum number of members necessary for a meeting to be held. The quorum will be specified in the regulations or constitution.

Outcome 4

RESOLUTION	Once passed, a motion becomes a resolution.
SECONDER	A person who supports the proposer of a motion.
UNANIMOUS	When all the members of a meeting have voted in favour of a motion it is said to be carried unanimously.
STANDING ORDERS	These are the organisational rules relating to the organisation and running of meetings and are usually found in its founding articles. These may lay down such things as what makes up a quorum, etc.
VERBATIM	A word-for-word record of what was said.

Preparation of the Notice of Meeting and Agenda

In order that the relevant people know about a meeting *(who, when* and *where)* and the items to be discussed at the meeting it is necessary to prepare a Notice of Meeting and Agenda. An example of a Notice of Meeting and Agenda is given below:

Notice of Meeting

A meeting of the Board of Directors is to be held in the Conference Room on Wednesday, 23 February 200– at 10.00 hours.

Agenda

1. Apologies for absence
2. Minutes of the previous meeting
3. Matters arising
4. Correspondence
5. Proposed expansion (architect giving presentation)
6. Appointment of new Administrative Assistant
7. Any other competent business
8. Date and time of next meeting

Outcome 4

The **Notice of Meeting** section explains what meeting is to be held, where it is to be held and when it is to be held – it should be straightforward to prepare. The length of notice you need to give those entitled to attend the meeting is normally stated in the Standing Orders of the meeting.

The **Agenda** gives the meeting a structure. The Agenda outlines what is to be discussed at the meeting. This gives those attending the meeting an opportunity to prepare for the meeting. The Agenda will make an essential contribution to the meeting's effectiveness and success.

The preparation of an Agenda is usually straightforward – items 1, 2, 3, 4, 7 and 8 in the example given are the same for nearly every meeting. The items in the middle of the Agenda depend on what is to be discussed at the meeting – it is this section that the Chairperson must pay particular attention to:

- it is important not to select too many items as this can result in the meeting being rushed and decisions taken without adequate consideration
- the items that are chosen need to be clearly defined so that those attending the meeting know exactly what is going to be discussed – if the items on the Agenda are too vague, this can cause problems
- the order in which the items appear on the Agenda is also important – they should be taken in a logical order with the more important items being dealt with first.

It is usual to issue the Notice of Meeting with the Agenda (as in the example). If time is short and an Agenda is not yet completed or there is a long time between meetings, a separate Notice of Meeting may be sent out.

Any other relevant information to do with the meeting, e.g. documents relating to Agenda items, should be issued with the Notice of Meeting and Agenda to give people a chance to prepare for the meeting. This can also save a lot of time at the meeting.

The Agenda should clearly identify any person who is to talk on a particular item.

Outcome 4

Chairperson's Agenda

The Chairperson should be well informed about the Agenda items so that he/she can chair the meeting effectively. A **Chairperson's Agenda** is often prepared so that the Chairperson can write in information or make notes against Agenda items prior to the meeting. The Secretary can assist the Chairperson by spacing out the normal Agenda and adding a 'notes' column. The Secretary and Chairperson would write in any relevant information in the notes column. An example of a Chairperson's Agenda is given below:

Chairperson's Agenda

A meeting of the Board of Directors is to be held in the Conference room on Wednesday, 23 February 200- at 1000 hours.

	Agenda		***Notes***
1.	Apologies for absence	1.	David Wong still in hospital – meeting's best wishes.
2.	Minutes of the previous meeting	2.	
3.	Matters arising	3.	Total cost of decorating Conference Room was £3,500
4.	Correspondence	4.	Letter of thanks from local college regarding company's response to request for work experience places
5.	Proposed expansion	5.	Approximate costing should be available
6.	Appointment of new Administrative Assistant	6.	Increased workload in HR department due to new staff appraisal system
7.	Any other business	7.	
8.	Date and time of next meeting	8.	Avoid 14-21 March - local holidays

Consequences of inadequate preparation for meetings

It has been emphasised that for a meeting to be successful it is important that it is carefully planned. Both the Secretary and Chairperson play a vital role in the planning of the meeting. But what can happen if the meeting is not properly planned?

Outcome 4

- if all those entitled to attend did not receive the Notice of Meeting and Agenda the numbers at the meeting would be affected – possibly the quorum would not be reached and the meeting would have to be postponed

- if the Agenda was not carefully planned the meeting might not cover important topics, or might overrun

- if the Chairperson was not well briefed, this would show during the discussion and might lead to poor decisions being taken

- if the venue booked was not suitable this could create problems – the room might be too small, or not set up as desired; it could even be double booked!

- essential information might not be available at the meeting – this could lead to ill-informed decisions

- if some people did not receive the Notice of Meeting, Agenda and/or any additional papers which should have been distributed prior to the meeting, it might not be possible to discuss certain items – discussion and decisions might have to be postponed to a future meeting

- people attending the meeting could feel that their time had been wasted – and time in business is money!

Methods of recording key issues and decisions at meetings

Formal meetings will require the completion of Minutes.

'Minutes' is the term given to the written record of what was discussed and decided during a meeting – they should be brief, accurate and clear. As indicated previously, the Secretary is responsible for taking notes during the meeting from which the Minutes can be prepared.

The following are some practical hints and suggestions on how you as Secretary could take the notes during a meeting:

- have an outline of the main points to be discussed pre-prepared with space left to record discussion and decisions; have a note pre-prepared of any information which you wish to state at the meeting; you could also have a note of those who are due to attend (and tick off those present) along with the names of absentees/apologies

Outcome 4

- write your notes in double-line spacing so that you can go back and insert a word or phrase easily if you need to
- write legibly
- try to avoid taking down every word said (even if you are using shorthand) – but be sure to record fully any important decisions
- try to pick up key words and phrases to act as triggers when you are preparing the Minutes
- try to ensure you know each person's name and use their initials in the left-hand margin against something they say
- asterisk or underline any important points or decisions reached
- make sure you note correctly the date of the next meeting. The Minutes should include the following:
- the name of the organisation, the type of meeting and the place, date and time of the meeting
- the names of those present with the name of the Chairperson first and that of the Secretary last. It is advisable to list the names of the other members in alphabetical order
- each Agenda item should be included in the Minutes with a brief note of what was discussed and decided. 'Resolutions' must contain the exact wording given at the meeting
- the date and time of the next meeting
- space for the Chairperson to sign and date the Minutes once they are agreed as a correct record at the next meeting.

The following is an example of such a set of Minutes:

Outcome 4

Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors held in the Conference Room on Wednesday, 23 February 200– at 10.00 hours.

Present

Mr Douglas Walker	Chairperson
Mr Steven Clark	Purchasing Manager
Mr Howard Finch	Finance Director
Mrs Moyra McGrath	Human Resources Director
Mrs Jatinder Sangar	Sales and Marketing Director
Miss Catherine Bradley	Secretary

1. Apologies for absence
An apology for absence was received from Mr David Wong, Production Director, who was in hospital. The Chairperson was instructed by the meeting to send him best wishes for a speedy recovery.
Proposed by Mr Finch, seconded by Mr Clark

2. **Minutes of the previous meeting** The Minutes of the previous meeting were taken as read, agreed as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

3. Matters arising
The Chairperson reported that the total cost of decorating the Conference Room was £3,500. The Secretary was to circulate a breakdown of costs to members.

4. Correspondence
The Secretary read out a letter of thanks from the local college regarding the company's response to their request for work experience places.

5. Proposed expansion
Mr Samuel Anderson, from Anderson and Donaldson Architects, gave a presentation on the proposed expansion of the factory. He anticipated that the projected cost figure would be available for the next meeting.

6. Appointment of new Administrative Assistant
The Board agreed that increased workload justified the appointment of a new Administrative Assistant in the HR Department. Mrs McGrath to arrange for recruitment and selection of a suitable applicant.

7. **Any other business**
There was no other competent business.

8. Date and time of next meeting
It was agreed that the next meeting would be held at 10.00 hours on Wednesday, 22 March 200–. The meeting closed at 11.15 hours.

Chairperson ____

Date ____

Outcome 4

At some meetings **Action Minutes** are preferred. These simply require the Secretary to show on a prepared layout the action required, who is to carry out each task and the target date for the tasks to be completed. An example of an extract from Action Minutes is given below:

Action minutes		
Date of meeting:	Wednesday, 23 February 200–	
Attending:	Mr Douglas Walker Mr Steven Clark Mr Howard Finch Mrs Moyra McGrath Mrs Jatinder Sangar Miss Catherine Bradley	
Action required	**By whom**	**Target date**
'Get Well Card' to be sent to Mr Wong	Mr Douglas Walker	Next Friday
Detail of costs of decorating Conference Room to be sent to members	Miss Catherine Bradley	Next Wednesday

The benefits of recording the key issues and decisions of a meeting using Minutes or Action Minutes are:

1. proof is provided of what was discussed
2. decisions made are recorded
3. any action required by members is highlighted – the Minutes can be a useful reminder!
4. they inform absentees, or interested non-members, about what took place at the meeting.

Outcome 4

At the beginning of the next meeting it is usual for the Chairperson to seek agreement from those present that the 'Minutes of the previous meeting are accepted as a true and correct record'. Not only does this prevent anyone at a future date from arguing about what was said, it also satisfies any legal requirements there may be.

The impact of technology on the conduct and organisation of meetings

There are a number of advantages which the development of information and communication technology has had for those arranging and taking part in meetings. These include:

- **E-mail –** a very quick and easy way of communicating with participants, sending documentation etc. Meetings can be set up quickly and group addresses can be created for regular meetings.

- **Electronic-diaries/calendars –** these are particularly useful for setting up meetings and making automatic entries into the participants' diaries (overcoming the problem of people forgetting to put it in themselves). The organiser of the meeting can view the participants' diaries and choose a common 'free' date and time, send invitations by e-mail and, upon receipt, the details are entered in everyone's diaries. Similarly, meetings can be cancelled in the same manner. This is a timesaving, efficient tool for arranging meetings.

- **Videoconferencing** (VC) – this is a very useful tool for meetings when participants are spread across various locations and travel time is an issue (especially if it is a short meeting). Videoconferencing equipment is common to most organisations these days and can range from static equipment used for large-scale meetings to mobile, desktop equipment for smaller meetings. Using a VC system eliminates the need for people to actually be there, whilst still allowing full participation, as users can see each other and simultaneously work on the same document. This is now widely used in organisations, although the slight time lapse and the effect of bad weather on video links have some impact on the quality of this system and many people still prefer to be physically present at meetings if possible.

- **Audioconferencing –** the ability for a number of parties to speak to one another is useful, especially if the nature or length of the discussion does not warrant a face-to-face meeting. Loud speakers are often used for larger meetings to enable everyone to be heard and take an active part.

- **Videophones –** as with video- and audio conferencing, these allow a number of people to communicate with each other without meeting in one place and are useful for those who cannot access videoconferencing technology.

Outcome 4

- **Networks –** organisations use different types of networks to connect computers in order to share information and communicate online. It is through the use of computer networks (LANs, WANs and the Internet) that such tools as video-conferencing and e-mail can be used for meetings. Similarly, the Internet can be used to set up secure **user groups** which are areas on the web that can be set up and used for communication between members of the group. The members may not ever meet face-to-face; however, they can set up discussions, send each other documents, leave comments or messages. Through use of passwords which only allow selected people to access these groups, the information contained in them can remain secure and confidential.

- **Collaborative white-boarding –** this technology allows for people at different locations to view and operate the same computer programme simultaneously over a computer network. One computer acts as host for a particular application, which everyone else can then see on their screens. The white boarding software allows people to highlight text, draw symbols, etc. without changing the original data. It is particularly useful for discussion, brainstorming and troubleshooting and is often used to complement video- or audio conferencing.

- **Online application sharing –** often known as groupware, this allows participants to access diaries, calendars, etc. but also allows for shared document management. Using a secure network, participants can view a common document, revise or edit it and ensure changes are tracked. In this way, people can liaise or collaborate on documentation without the need to meet.

OUTCOME 5

Outcome 5
Explain the importance of providing effective customer service

Customer service policies

We have all been into shops, banks and other organisations and walked out again determined never to go back. Why? The answer most probably isn't because there was something wrong with the service or goods, it is more likely to be that we were unhappy with how we were treated. In other words, it is because of poor customer service.

In today's competitive business environment, the old expression 'The customer is always right' should perhaps be replaced with 'The customer can always go elsewhere.' It costs a business far more to attract a new customer than to retain an existing one. Unless a business has a monopoly or a niche market, they have competitors all around them offering similar products at similar prices – customers can always take their custom there. One way they can prevent this and retain customer loyalty is by the quality of their customer service. This goes beyond simply complying with consumer legislation – it is about giving 'added value' to a customer's experience when using the organisation – going that extra mile the customer will appreciate and come back to experience again.

Businesses strive to keep their customers happy through different customer-service strategies. Businesses have to care for external customers and also internal customers (or employees). Good customer service is about satisfying the needs of individuals and retaining loyalty to the organisation.

Most organisations will have a **Mission Statement** which outlines its main aims and focus. It will usually include a general statement regarding quality and standards. Two examples of mission statements which seek to communicate the company's focus on customer service are those of:

EasyJet: *'To provide our customers with safe, good value, point to point air services. To effect and to offer a consistent and reliable product, and fares appealing to leisure and business markets on a range of European routes. To achieve this we will develop our people and establish lasting relationships with our suppliers.'*

KLM airlines: *'KLM is positioned as an airline operating worldwide from a European base, providing professional service for passengers and shippers, demanding high-quality products at competitive prices, with a professional, reliable, punctual product, and a caring, friendly service.'*

In addition, organisations will have a separate **Customer Service Strategy –** a written statement of broad principles relating to organisational customer service. From this will be developed formal standards and policies applying to both systems and staff.

Outcome 5

Customer-service policies will cover areas such as:

- **Customer-service statement** or **promise –** these are directed at customers and may detail what they should expect in terms of how the organisation will deal with them, deadlines and quality of service. Some organisations have even gone so far as to promise penalty payments if they do not meet their promised deadline for solving a problem. For example, gas and electricity companies may promise to pay £x for every day they are late in reconnecting a service.

- **Service standards –** these are staff guidelines for dealing with external customers and will contain details such as how many times a telephone may ring before it must be answered, the greeting that is to be given, length of time in which a customer should be dealt with, etc.

- **Loyalty schemes –** these were introduced by organisations to 'reward' customers for loyalty to the company's service or product. One of the early examples of these was Co-op stamps – customers received stamps with purchases which could be collected and cashed in for money or goods. Loyalty cards, frequent travel air miles, and discounted petrol are common loyalty rewards. All these rewards are aimed at retaining customers by showing that the organisations value and care for them.

- **Complaints procedure –** these are formal procedures both for customers when making a complaint and for the organisation when dealing with a complaint. Many customers will be happy to remain with the organisation following a complaint – *if* their complaint is dealt with in the right way:

  – *Customer complaints procedures:* These clarify the means by which a complaint should be made, to whom, the length of time to expect a complaint to be acknowledged and then dealt with, and any other information such as address of the relevant Ombudsman.

  – *Organisational procedures:* These provide for staff the detailed stages a complaint will go through, and at each stage the member of staff who will deal with the complaint, by when, and what outcome there should be. Underpinning this will often be guidelines as to how to deal with complaints or even checklists staff will operate by.

- **Market research –** is used to gain information relating to the marketplace. Market research not only analyses such things as the product, its price and the competition but will also include customer attitudes towards the service they receive. Organisations listen to their customers and place value on their views. In order to hear these views, they will use:

  – *Customer focus groups* – face-to-face meetings with small groups of customers. These provide the organisation with feedback on their goods/services or opinions regarding proposed new products and services. In addition, the customers feel they are being listened to and taken account of, which will encourage brand loyalty.

Outcome 5

- *Customer satisfaction surveys* – these are also used for feedback on a wide range of areas including staff attitudes and service, product and service, quality improvement etc.

- **Mystery customer –** these are used by many companies to discreetly check on the standard of service being offered in their organisation. 'Mystery customers' are employed to act as a normal customer and report back on the standard of service they received. This information can then be fed back to staff – either to praise and reinforce good standards or remedy concerns regarding poor standards.

- **Quality Management Systems –** for example, TQM (Total Quality Management) – have been adopted by many organisations to instil a culture within the organisation by which quality is the responsibility of all the staff. The customer is at the heart of the organisation and customer service is not just the responsibility of the person on the shop floor but of everyone – from the sales person to the stockroom assistant, to the delivery driver.

The role of the administrative assistant in providing effective customer care

External customers

When dealing with external customers, it is essential that an administrative assistant is aware of organisational policies and procedures and adheres to the standards of service expected of them. At the very least, he or she should be aware of the mission statement of the organisation. Effective customer care includes:

Appropriate behaviour – relationships with external customers should be reasonably formal with the right level of politeness and courtesy – this might include ensuring you use the right terms of address, e.g. Mr, Mrs, rather than first names.

Communication – it is vital that customers are kept informed – it is as important to let them know when something hasn't happened as when it has – there is nothing more infuriating for anyone than lack of information.

Honesty and trust – customers appreciate honesty, even if it is bad news – lying to keep a customer happy will only result in worse relations later on. Trust is a vital ingredient in good customer relations.

Approachability – giving a customer the impression you don't really want to hear from them or deal with them doesn't make for good customer service. A pleasant manner, positive body language and a welcoming smile are always appreciated.

Stay within boundaries – in any job, there are limits within which you are allowed to operate. There will be systems and procedures, which must be followed and these must not be overstepped or ignored. It may be tempting to make decisions outwith your remit in order to 'please the customer'; however, in the long run, it is better to stay within these boundaries, as those decisions may be overturned. It is essential that everyone is fully aware of the scope and limits of their authority.

Outcome 5

Internal customers

It is just as important to treat internal customers with the same level of service as those customers outside the organisation. What must be remembered is that at work, we are all customers of one another and the way we deal with each other affects workflow, productivity and the motivation and morale of staff.

Relationships with people at work will vary – these may include formal relationships with senior staff such as managers or more informal ones with colleagues and subordinates. Once again, it is vital to adopt the correct behaviour and to stay within the limits and scope of your responsibilities.

One of the ways in which organisations have attempted to establish good internal customer care is by use of **service-level agreements** which aim to establish standards of service between departments at work. These may include agreed response times (even down to how many rings of the phone before you pick it up) and document completion. These are drawn up for different services, including general administration.

With agreed standards of service, each department in an organisation can expect to have to achieve certain levels of quality of service; however, this can only work if the attitude of staff behind this is of the right kind. It is important that the idea of internal customer service is developed by an organisation in line with the idea of quality improvement and individual responsibility towards quality and customer service. It is vital that employees can see how their part within the organisations links to other parts rather than viewing their work in isolation and that smaller work teams meet within a larger team context in order to achieve this.

Communication with colleagues and customers

A vital factor in providing customer care is that of effective communication. It is crucial that an organisation communicates with its customers. Communication can take several forms; however, most communication involves listening and speaking and the impact of what we are trying to communicate comes from:

- the words we use
- the tone of our voice
- our body language.

Research has shown the relative importance of these aspects is as follows:

- words – 7%
- tone of voice – 38%
- body language – 55%.

Outcome 5

Methods of communication

Face-to-face

Often preferred for a number of reasons:

- opportunity for immediate feedback
- can identify uncertainties and clarify immediately
- very personal
- easier to recall customers' faces than names only
- allows relationships to develop.

When dealing with customers face-to-face, first impressions count. Influences on this include:

- body language
- facial expression
- professional appearance
- tone of voice and manner.

Telephone

The telephone is widely used in customer service today and more and more organisations are using call centres to deal with their customer service function. Advantages of telephone contact include:

- customers do not need to leave their homes
- useful for general or brief enquiries
- relatively cheap in terms of cost and time
- usually takes less time than a face-to-face meeting.

Unfortunately, telephone conversations do not create the rapport that face-to-face contact can and it is impossible to pick up the visual clues such as uncertainty or unease which face-to-face contact provides.

Organisations will usually have a telephone policy for dealing with customers and will train staff to use this form of communication effectively. This often includes:

- prompt answering of calls (often within x number of rings)
- form of welcome and information
- procedure if unable yourself to help the customer
- closing the call.

Outcome 5

Whether making or taking a call, it is vital that the customer is greeted with courtesy and warmth and that the conversation is easy and comfortable with the right degree of formality. It is also crucial that calls are handled in a professional manner and that the customer is left with the right image of the organisation. Training on telephone techniques often includes learning:

- appropriate talking pace
- patience
- helpful, courteous language
- telephone body language (a 'smiling' voice, etc.)
- interesting tone of voice
- questioning for understanding
- prompts for information
- breathing techniques
- listening skills.

Written

It is often helpful to put things in writing when dealing with customers, as this:

- creates a record
- confirms understanding
- provides reassurance and confidence
- allows the customer time to read and understand.

Incoming documents
Organisations must ensure that all written communication from customers is dealt with promptly. If dealing with a letter of complaint for which the investigation will take time, there should be some acknowledgement to the customer, who should be kept informed at all times.

Outgoing documents
It is important that any written communication is accurate, well presented, well written and timely. Organisations often use a range of standard and one-off documents; however, whichever is used, the customers should always feel they are being addressed personally.

E-mail
This is becoming an increasingly popular way to communicate with customers due to the ability to send messages to large numbers of people very quickly. There are also a number of other advantages:

- less formal than letters
- unlike telephone, messages can be received when people are not at their desks
- unlike telephone the sender can compose a draft before sending
- has a number of useful features, e.g. flag up when read, request reply, mark urgent, track history of correspondence, etc.

Outcome 5

However, just as customers may use e-mail because it is immediate, they may also expect an immediate response – an expectation the organisation will have to try to meet.

It is just as important with this form of communication as with letter writing that the right tone and words are used and that the message is structured and well written.

Websites

Most organisations (large and small) are using websites to promote their business and liaise with customers. A well designed and easy-to-use website which contains detailed and continually updated information can be a useful customer-service tool. It can be used for:

- selling a service/product
- providing information
- obtaining information.

The benefits of effective customer service to the organisation

The biggest benefit of effective customer service to an organisation is that of **customer loyalty.** As mentioned earlier, it is far better to retain customers than win new ones. Customer loyalty does not just mean repeat business – it brings other rewards such as recommendations to new customers, setting a tradition of use by the wider family, etc. Other benefits, which are all inter-related include:

- satisfied customers
- satisfied and motivated staff
- low staff turnover
- reduced costs
- good reputation
- competitive edge
- increased market share.

The impact on the organisation of poor customer service

The opposite effects of the benefits listed above would result from poor customer service. Ultimately, poor customer service can be the downfall of an organisation.

Administration
Information Technology for Management
[HIGHER]

OUTCOME 1

Outcome 1
Explain the role of information in decision making

The nature of information

Data and information

Data = raw facts and figures which have been collected and organised but have not been processed, i.e. they have not been manipulated in any way to be meaningful to the person(s) who have to make decisions.

Information = data which has been processed into a form which assists the person(s) who received the information to arrive at a decision.

Information may take the following forms:

- quantitative
- qualitative
- primary
- secondary
- external
- internal.

'I know that information can be quantitative or qualitative, primary or secondary. My trouble is that I don't know where to find the information in the first place!'

Quantitative
This type of information is easily counted or measured. Quantitative information is factual and it is often in the form of numbers, e.g. sales figures, salary costs, production rates and numbers of people employed.

Qualitative
This type of information is descriptive and is concerned with opinions, attitudes and value judgements, e.g. where customers are required to rate the service offered by a firm as being 'very good', 'good', 'poor' or 'very poor'.

Primary
This is information which is gathered first-hand for a specific purpose. Primary information is new information. The information may be collected through observation, opinion polls, interviews, telephone surveys, questionnaires, etc.

Secondary
This is information which already exists. It has been gathered for one purpose in the past but is available for other uses. Organisations should check whether secondary information is already available before arranging for the collection of primary information. Secondary information may be contained in government statistics, the Internet (www), teletext, trade journals, consumer surveys, etc.

Outcome 5

External
This is information which is obtained from outwith the organisation. External information may be available from a range of sources, e.g. government reports, trade journals, newspaper articles, CD-ROM and the financial press.

Internal
This is information which is gathered from the organisation's own internal records. It is concerned with what is happening within the organisation.

Role and importance of information

The 1980s may be viewed as the infancy of the information and communications revolution. Since the early 1980s there has been a huge growth in both the amount of information and the ways in which information may be communicated and accessed by individuals and organisations. This has been brought about through developments in the microchip within computer and telecommunications technology. For the foreseeable future advances in computer and telecommunications technology are likely to continue at an ever-increasing pace with more information becoming more accessible to more people.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is the **collecting, processing** and **transmitting** of information by electronic means.

Collecting by electronic means – by computer (internal and external electronic mail over computer networks), the Internet, fax, voicemail, telephone, telephone answering machine, electronic diary, etc.

Processing by electronic means – by computer (using software packages such as word processing, spreadsheet, database, desktop publishing (DTP), etc.).

Within business organisations managers increasingly look towards increased use and improvements in ICT to improve their own efficiency, the efficiency of other employees and the quality of decision making within the organisation.

Some advantages of the increased use of ICT include:

- increase in the volume of information which can be accessed, processed and transmitted
- increase in the speed and ease with which information can be accessed, processed and transmitted
- increase in employees' productivity
- improvement in the quality of output of information (accuracy and appearance)
- increase in employees' motivation (the time spent on routine, repetitive tasks is reduced)
- increased opportunities to standardise the collection, processing and transmission of information within the organisation
- flexibility in the use of equipment (computers can be used to operate a range of software packages).

Outcome 1

Sources of information

Information is available in a variety of forms and may be accessed by many different means.

Type	Description	Means
Electronic	Information held in electronic form – on computer files and databases, on CD-ROM, the Internet, viewdata, teletext. Information held in electronic form can usually be: • accessed quickly • printed as required • queried and manipulated to suit requirements	• Computer files and databases may be internal or external to the organisation (files and databases may be accessed and transferred within local area networks or wider areas networks) • CD-ROM (many reference books, dictionaries, thesauruses, guides, encyclopaedias) and newspapers are now available on CD-ROM) • Internet (world wide web: www) contains a vast amount of information on 'websites', e.g. news, travel, commercial information and government statistics • Teletext (information accessed via a TV, e.g. news, weather, sport, financial information and travel – cannot be printed or manipulated) • Viewdata (general and specific information, e.g. New Prestel).

Paper-based	Information in printed form – the information may be internal or external to the organisation	• Internal and external (see examples below) Other paper-based sources: • Phone book • Yellow pages • Dictionaryies, encyclopaedias, gazetteers • Road maps • AA/RAC handbook • *Whitaker's Almanac* • Postal leaflets • Railway timetables • World airways guide • *Roget's Thesaurus* • *Who's Who* • Croner's reference books • Hansard
Oral	Information is passed by word mouth – in order for this to be of value as a reliable source of information a full and accurate record should be kept of what was said.	▪ Meetings ▪ Interviews ▪ Visits ▪ Telephone ▪ Cellular (mobile) phone ▪ Videophone ▪ Videoconferencing
Internal	Information which is obtained from organisation's own internal records – the value will depend on the accuracy, relevance and quality of the information.	▪ Personnel records ▪ Payroll (wages) records ▪ Company handbooks ▪ Company files ▪ Minutes of meetings ▪ Internal databases ▪ Stock records ▪ Financial reports ▪ Sales and purchases information ▪ Departmental reports

External	Information which is obtained from outwith the organisation – may be required when comparing the organisation's performance against other similar businesses.	▪ Government reports and publications ▪ HMSO reports ▪ External databases ▪ Internet (www) ▪ Local authority reports ▪ Local enterprise company reports ▪ Company reports ▪ Catalogues ▪ Price lists ▪ Viewdata (e.g. New Prestel) ▪ Teletext ▪ Reference books ▪ Newspaper articles (may be available on CD-ROM) ▪ Professional and trade associations ▪ Market research

Outcome 1

Detailed in the table below are examples of what some sources of information could be used for.

Source	Use(s)
Telecommunications	
Phone Book	Names, addresses and phone numbers of subscribers; business fax numbers; information on phone services; useful numbers; national codes; international information
Yellow Pages	Names, addresses, phone, fax and telex numbers classified by trades and professions
Business Pages	Names, addresses, phone, fax and telex numbers of companies who supply goods and services to other companies
British Telecom Telex Directory	Names, addresses and telex numbers of all UK subscribers
Travel	
AA (Automobile Association) and RAC (Royal Automobile Club) Handbooks	Road maps; hotels; garages
ABC World Airways Guide	Timetables for all regular air services throughout the world
A–Z Guides	Town street maps
Chambers World Gazetteer	Detailed geographical statistical information (location, population, features, etc.)
World Atlas	Maps; climate; transport; population; land use; etc.
English Language Dictionary	Meaning of words; spelling of words; parts of speech; derivation of words; pronunciation of words; abbreviations, meaning of foreign words and phrases
Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and	Synonyms (words of similar meaning) arranged together
Companies	
Directory of Directors	Names of Directors and their (UK) companies
The (Macmillan) Stock Exchange Official Year Book	An outline of all companies listed on the London Stock Exchange (registered office, directors, company secretary, principal subsidiaries, company history, financial data, etc.)

Outcome 1

Famous People	
Who's Who Who Was Who	Biographies of famous or important living people. Biographies of famous people who have died
Miscellaneous	
Hansard	Verbatim (word for word) reports of proceedings in Parliament
Mailguide	Royal Mail services
Pears Cyclopaedia	Gazetteer; historical events; prominent people; public affairs; politics; science; economic events; music; sport
Whitaker's Almanac	Previous year's main events; the Government; Local Government; UK statistics; finance; Royal family; Parliament; European Parliament; education; law courts; defence; names and addresses of societies, Government offices and other institutions
Black's Titles and Forms of Addresses	Forms of address for people who hold a high rank or official position
Croner's Reference Books	Employment law, health and safety; VAT; exports and imports, self-employment
Government Bookshops (formerly HMSO)	Government publications; health and safety; statistics; parliamentary papers

Electronic sources of information

Many of the traditional sources of information are now available on CD-ROM or as websites on the Internet. These provide fast and easy access to information and allow searches for particular aspects of the information to be carried out at high speed. Increasingly organisations are looking to the Internet to supply information.

The following are just **a few** examples of sources of information (and their uses) which are available on **CD-ROM.**

Outcome 1

Subject	Use(s)
Business Abstracts 1982-97	
Census 1991	Demographic and socio-economic data from the censuses for England and Wales and for Scotland
Family Spending 1989-94/5	Supplies details of how households spend their money
F & S Index 1990-97	Companies and products
Facts about Britain 1945-95	
Regional Trends	Statistical data on social demographic and economic topics illustrated regionally
Social Tends 1970-95	Statistical data on changes in British society (produced by the Central Statistical Office)
Newspapers: Financial Times 1990 Herald 1993 Scotsman & Scotland on Sunday 1993 Times 1990 Magazines and journals:	
British Medical Journal 1986-96	
Economist 1987	
Hansard 1988/89	Full text of parliamentary debates of the House of Commons
HEBS (Health Education Board for Scotland)	
Grolier Multimedia Encyclopaedia	
Encyclopaedia Britannica	
Keesing's Record of World Events 1960-94	
Phone Disc	
UKOP 1980	UK Catalogue of Official Publications (Government Publications)
Oxford English Dictionary	
Who's Who 1897–1996	

Outcome 1

The following are just a few examples of **Internet** sources of information and their uses (please note – access to some of these websites may be on a subscription basis).

Subject	Uses
Travel	
Travelang's Foreign Languages for Travellers	Online searchable phrasebooks for a wide range of foreign languages.
The Virtual Tourist	Facts, figures, maps and guides to almost any part of the world.
Magellan Maps	Maps of countries and cities.
Multi Media Mapping	Maps of towns and cities in the UK (user enters the name of the town/city or post code).
Foreign Exchange Rates	Provides the current exchange rates for major currencies.
Eurostar	Provides timetable and fare information
How Far Is It?	Calculates distances between cities worldwide.
Local Time Around the World	Gives the current time around the world.
London Transport	Travel information (including the London underground), where to buy tickets, ticket costs, etc.
Scotrail	Rail timetables
Scottish Citylink	Timetable and sample fares.
Weather	
Air Quality Bulletins	Provides hourly bulletins on pollutant levels.
Weather Net	Provides thousands of weather forecasts from around the world.
UK Weather	Provides UK weather forecasts from the Met Office.
English Language	
Acronym and Abbreviation List	Used to find the meanings of acronyms and abbreviations, e.g. NATO.
Roget's Thesaurus	
Webster's Dictionary	
The Media	
Online Newspapers:	
Electronic Telegraph (The Daily Telegraph)	
The Guardian and The Observer	
The Times	
The Financial Times	

Outcome 1

News Services:
CNN (Cable News Network)
The Press Association

Online Magazines:
BMJ (British Medical Journal)
The Economist
New Scientist
National Geographic
Time

Broadcasting:
BBC
Channel 4

Other
Government Organisations and
Political Parties:
CCTA Government Information (UK)
UK Foreign Office
Her Majesty's Treasury
Westminster Watch (diary of
Commons highlights)
The Conservative Party
The Labour Party
The Liberal Democrats
Plaid Cymru
The Scottish National Party

European Community:
Europa (European Union's
policies, documents and institutions)
European Parliament
Governments on-line

Rest of World:
United Nations
World Bank
World Trade Organisations

Electronic Yellow Pages

Financial Times

Stock Market Data and Reports	Provides daily closing prices of the London Stock Exchange.

Outcome 1

If you have the opportunity you should have a look at the information contained in some of the above websites.

Information has been described as the lifeblood of an organisation. It is the basis upon which an organisation operates and upon which decisions are made. To make effective decisions you require good (or reliable, up-to-date, high-quality) information.

Features of good information

Good information must be:

Accurate	Having inaccurate information may be worse than having no information at all – users of information must be certain that the information does not contain errors (it must provide a sound basis upon which to make decisions)
Up-to-date	The latest information should be available, e.g. on recent sales trends and stock levels when determining production targets for the next year
Relevant	The information should be relevant to the area being looked at and the decision which has to be taken – irrelevant information may delay or confuse decision taking
Sufficient	The information should be comprehensive and complete but concise
Appropriate	The information should be presented in a format which is comprehensible and can be readily used by the people required to make decisions – the information must not be ambiguous or misleading
Available	The information should be available at the time it is required – if there is a delay in accessing the required information then decisions will be delayed and opportunities may be missed or wrong decisions may be taken
Cost effective	The information should not be costly to obtain – what is acceptable as far as cost is concerned will, of course, depend on the type and level of decision to be taken.

The basic requirement of information is that it must be **meaningful and useful to its user.**

Outcome 1

Decision making

Decision making is concerned with making choices, i.e. choosing between alternative courses of action.

Personal decision making

At a personal level decision making could mean:

1. deciding on how to spend your leisure time, e.g. whether to stay in and watch television or go to the cinema with friends
2. deciding on how your bedroom is decorated, e.g. whether to paper or paint the walls
3. deciding on a future course of study, e.g. a course at the local college or another course in a distant town.

Decisions may be:

- short-term as in example 1 above
- medium-term, as in example 2
- long-term, as in example 3.

The level of risks, or consequences of taking the wrong decision, will usually depend on the type of decision, i.e. short, medium or long term. Short-term decisions are usually low risk whereas long-term decisions tend to be high risk. For example, once you have begun a course of study it may not be easy to change your mind and move from one course and/or college to another.

Management decision making

Whatever a manager does, he does through making decisions. These decisions may be made as a matter of routine. Indeed he may not even realise that he is making them. Or they may affect the future existence of the enterprise and require years of systematic analysis. But management is always a decision-making process.

The Practice of Management – Peter F Drucker

Businesses are faced with a variety of decisions – short-term, medium-term and long-term. Short-term decisions will have to be taken on a daily basis. Long-term decisions will be taken far less frequently – such decisions will, however, affect the business over a number of years.

Outcome 1

Management decision making has been described as the way in which managers at all levels choose between alternatives to reach objectives which have been set for the business. Managing a business successfully involves taking the right decisions at the right time.

Small business organisations
In a small organisation the owner of the business will make all the decisions. For example, in a one-person window-cleaning business the owner will make decisions such as:

1. what time to begin work, e.g. whether to start at 8.00 a.m., or 8.30 a.m.
2. what type of advertising to use, e.g. whether to advertise in the local newspaper or on local radio
3. whether to expand the business, e.g. whether to remain as a one-person business or take on another employee.

In the one-person business organisation as above, the owner takes all the decisions and will also take on all the risks of making a wrong decision. As in the personal scenario, the above decisions may be categorised as short-term, medium-term and long-term.

Large business organisations
In large business organisations there are likely to be several layers of management. Managers at the different levels are associated with the different types of decisions, i.e. long-term decisions (also known as **strategic),** medium-term decisions (also known as **tactical)** and short-term decisions (also known as **operational).**

Types of decision	**Taken by**	**Levels of management**
Strategic – long-term	~	Top (Board of Directors, Chief Executives, Heads of Departments, etc.)
Tactical – medium-term	~	Middle (Senior Staff, Factory Managers, etc.)
Operational – short-term	~	Lower (Supervisors, Managerial Assistants, etc.)

Strategic (long-term)
Decisions – Strategic, Tactical and Operational

- Strategic – I'm going to make long-term decisions about my future.
- Tactical – I'm going to plan out how I will get there over the next six months.
- Operational – I'll start tomorrow.

Outcome 1

Strategic decisions are taken by the most senior people in the business organisation – top management. Strategic decisions set the aims and objectives of the organisation. Strategic decisions are concerned with the production of policies which give the organisation its overall direction, purpose and competitive edge – they are not concerned with the detail of how such policies are put into action.

Strategic decisions are high-risk – once taken, they will be difficult and costly to reverse if something goes wrong. Such decisions are long-term – they will affect the operation of the organisation over a number of years.

Examples of strategic decisions:
- whether to expand the market for the firm's products, e.g. by setting up a trading partnership in the Far East
- whether to install networks within the firm
- whether to take over a rival firm
- where to locate a new factory
- whether to increase the product range (in a manufacturing firm)
- which method of long-term finance to use to finance future expansion
- whether to introduce a new organisational structure.

Tactical (medium-term)

Tactical decisions are usually taken by the senior departmental or middle managers in a business organisation. Such decisions are concerned with putting the strategic decisions into action. Tactical decisions are concerned with bringing together and using the resources of a business to achieve the aims and objectives of the organisation.

Tactical decisions are medium-risk – they will take some time to put right if it is realised that the wrong decision has been taken. Such decisions are medium-term and will typically affect the operation of the business over a period of six months to one year.

Examples of tactical decisions:
- whether to introduce new working arrangements in the factory
- whether to increase/decrease overall stock levels held in the factory
- whether to increase/decrease staffing levels in a department
- whether to extend flexitime to the office staff
- whether to set out the office on an open-plan basis.

Operational (short-term)

Operational decisions are usually taken by junior management staff. Such decisions are concerned with the detail of tactical decisions. The managers and supervisors at this level are expected to take the day-to-day decisions to ensure that standards and targets are met and adjustments are made in line with changing circumstances. Operational decisions will affect the working of an organisation over a period of from a few days to a few months.

Outcome 1

Operational decision making usually carries low-level risk. If it is recognised that a wrong decision has been taken it can usually be rectified quickly and at little cost to the organisation.

Examples of operational decisions:

- whether to move workers from one job to another to ensure that weekly production targets are met
- how to organise leave arrangements
- when to schedule meetings of staff in the sales department.

The following are examples of operational decisions which could be taken by an administrative assistant:

- how much stock of paper to hold in the office
- how to organise the holiday rota for the office staff
- whether to reorganise part of the filing system in the office
- whether to up-date advice on the use of passwords in the office
- whether to introduce a new procedure for dealing with the employer's urgent mail.

OUTCOME 2

Outcome 2
Describe the impact of ICT on workflow, working practices and management and security of information

Impact of ICT on workflow

Developments in ICT have undoubtedly improved workflow. The ability to access shared information, transmit information electronically and communicate around a computer network have all reduced the need for movement and duplication of documents.

Local and wide area networks have allowed organisations to access and communicate information as never before without the need for paper copies to be passed around from desk to desk.

E-mail has allowed fast communication without staff leaving their desks – documents can be sent between departments and meetings can be arranged and even held on-line.

Networked software such as databases and electronic diaries allow users to access centrally stored information at their desks.

In addition, as technology has led to de-layering of organisations, the impact on workflow has been to remove tiers, which in the past often hampered communication and the flow of information.

To summarise, the impact of ICT on workflow can result in:

- reduced need for movement of people
- fast communication around the organisation
- reduced need to accommodate people in specific areas
- fewer layers of management around which information has to flow
- reduced amount of lost/misplaced documents
- less time wasted
- reduced costs.

Impact of ICT on working practices
The reduction in the need to physically move people and paper has reduced the requirement to lay out offices specifically with workflow in mind. No longer do related staff or departments have to work alongside each other – in fact, many organisations now ‘hot-desk’ where no-one ‘owns’ a desk but takes whichever is free, wherever they are in the organisation.

Improvements in ICT have also resulted in a large increase in the numbers of employees able to work either wholly or in part at home. The ease with which good communication can be maintained with a business while working away from it has resulted in home working and teleworking (as described in Administrative Services, Outcome 2) becoming much more commonplace working practices.

Outcome 2

In addition, improvements in video- and audioconferencing equipment have made ‘remote’ meetings a much more cost-effective way of conducting business than traditional methods.

The advantages of data management systems to organisations

Over the last 20–30 years, organisations have moved from having one mainframe computer to process data for a few of their activities (such as payroll or accounts) to having company-wide, often country- or worldwide, networks of computers affecting and controlling every aspect of their business, and used by large numbers of people, both internal and external to the organisation. The vast quantities of data and information that are held by these networks (and which are the life blood of any organisation) must be organised and protected – in other words, this data must be managed.

Data management is all about making the best use of resources in order to maximise the benefits of information and increase the effectiveness of the organisation – in this case it is about setting up systems, procedures and controls relating to the way data is **input, stored** and **retrieved,** who it is **accessed** by, how it is kept **up-to-date** and how it is kept **secure.**

Data management systems may involve some or all of the following:

Centralised systems

Many organisations will have a central department (e.g. Management Information Service or Information Systems Department) dealing with computer services. This department will normally have responsibility for data management around the organisation involving areas such as purchase and maintenance of hardware and software, setting up systems and procedures, training, user policies, codes of practice and support systems. Other organisations may prefer to allow individual departments to operate their own systems; however, the advantages of a centralised service are:

- an overview of organisational data requirements and performance
- standardisation of computer hardware and software
- standardised systems and procedures
- common standards and protocols for users
- ability to prioritise purchase of new hardware and software across the company
- control of what is being used and how
- build-up of expertise and specialisation – ability to keep abreast of developments.

Whether data management is carried out within a centralised setting or not, there are a number of features of good data management.

Outcome 2

Choice of hardware and software

It is essential that any decisions regarding purchase of hardware and software are made based on organisational needs – what the company does, the kind of data involved and who will actually use the systems.

Hardware
The choice of appropriate hardware is an important factor in data management as this can affect the speed and storage of data. It is vital that an organisation keeps up to date with developments in this area if they wish to be at the leading edge of technological advances.

Decisions as to ***processing speed, hard-drive*** and ***memory*** capacity of computers will affect the speed and capability of your system and it is vital that organisations have plans in place for a rolling update of hardware to ensure optimum effectiveness of their data systems.

Choice of **storage and retrieval devices** will also affect the capability of your system, and choices include:

- ***write -protected floppy disks –*** which ensure stored data cannot be overwritten
- ***magnetic tape –*** useful for holding large amounts of back-up or archived data
- ***CD -ROMs –*** hold a large amount of data and are easily stored;
- ***worm disks*** (write once, read many) – these can be used to write your own material on; and have a large storage capacity. Good for storing graphics/photographs or archiving material that will not require change
- ***zip disks –*** these hold large amounts of data and have fast retrieval
- ***pen drives –*** portable, easy to use, giving fast transfer of data.

Although keyboards are still the most common form of data input, other **input devices** are used or are being developed, such as:

- ***voice data entry*** allows users to speak into a microphone; the software interprets this and displays it on screen for editing using the keyboard – advances in this form of input are being made all the time
- ***scanners*** and ***optical character recognition*** (OCR) can be used to scan documents and images
- ***hand-held devices*** are portable and increasingly used to input information remotely which can be downloaded to the main computer at a later time
- ***touch screen*** allows a user to touch particular areas of the screen rather than type – e.g. McDonalds use this form of data input for entering customer orders.

Other input devices can include mouse, light pen, magnetic ink character recognition (MICR), smart card, bar-code reader and optical mark recognition. The type chosen will depend on its suitability for your requirements.

Outcome 2

Software
As well as the basic ***operating system software,*** there are other types of software which organisations use to help their data management.

Utility progammes help make life easier for computer users to carry out common tasks that every user needs to do at one time or another. This includes file-management activities such as searching for lost files or re-organising files on disk to free space (defragmenting), checking for viruses or checking user IDs and passwords.

Performance management software can be used to monitor, analyse and report on the performance of a computer system and can help managers to monitor current and future hardware requirements.

Communications software is used in a mainframe environment to control the flow of data to and from remote sites.

Applications software – most organisations will use a combination of ***general - purpose software*** such as word-processing, spreadsheet and database applications which can be used by all employees within the organisation. ***Integrated*** packages (for example, Microsoft Office or Lotus Smartsuite) are now commonly used – this is where different applications are available within the same package and feature common commands and the ability to integrate data between them. Most organisations will operate their software on a network basis for common access and communication.

Many organisations will also use general software packages to carry out a particular activity such as accounting; however, they may also use ***customised software*** which has been specially written for the organisation. Examples of this might be specialised timetabling or database packages.

The majority of organisations hold the bulk of their information on a ***database management system.*** This system provides a centralised database resource for the whole organisation. Instead of each department designing and using their own database files (which cannot be shared around the organisation and which may result in a lot of duplication), a database management system allows a common database file to contain different tables of information which can be linked together. Each table within the database can be designed to meet the needs of all the different users, can be accessed by everyone and can also be customised to suit particular requirements by use of software features such as sort, filter, query, report, etc. Advantages of this are:

- data is not stored several times in separate files
- data is consistent – held once, not several times in different forms
- more information is available to all users from the one database
- greater security – different levels of access can be granted so users can only view or update the parts of the database they are authorised for
- reduces time spent inputting data – because data is held in one file only

Outcome 2

- data accuracy – because the database is designed by a specialist, the integrity of the data can be improved by use of appropriate validation features to minimise input error.

Security and integrity of data

An issue for all organisations is that of the security and integrity of the data they hold and good data management should address the risks involved in this. **Security** of data is concerned with areas such as theft, damage and destruction, whilst **integrity** of data concerns 'correctness' of data and involves the prevention of inaccurate data entry or alteration (this can be both accidental or malicious). There is also the need to consider privacy and confidentiality factors involved with holding data.

Organisations must assess any risks to their data and put appropriate management systems in place to counter these. Data security and integrity issues include:

- **Physical security** of:
  - *hardware* – it is not only the threat of theft of hardware that managers have to think about, it is the theft of the data stored on it. Organisations may choose to do such things as mark their equipment, keep inventories, lists of users against equipment and may even secure equipment to desks or require staff to 'padlock' portable computers. Physical security also includes safe storage of disks/CDs or other data storage material to prevent accident or loss.

  - *software* – organisations may have procedures which employees must use to close down their machines if leaving their desks or to close down files in front of visitors to prevent unauthorised sight of, or access to, information.

- **Back-up procedures** to ensure a back-up copy of data is taken in case of accident or damage to the original. This might include automatic and ongoing file back-up for users and, more importantly, regular back-up of data on a company-wide basis in case of serious accident or damage to the system.

- **Access rights –** it is important that organisations ensure that all who need access to data have it, but also that people who should not have access do not. Even authorised users do not normally have the right to see all data held on company databases and rights could be set at different levels including read-only, read/write or no access at all. Access could also be limited to particular terminals or to particular times in the day. Security of access could include:

  - *log-in procedures* to ensure only those authorised have access to data;

  - *password protection* of files and data. Many organisations operate systems which require staff to change passwords on a regular basis.

Outcome 2

- **Help-desk/technician support** to respond to user queries or technical problems speedily.

- **File-management** systems to ensure data is stored and retrieved effectively. This will include archiving old data, regular back-up procedures and general disk clean-up/clear-out. It is very important for organisations to have good 'house-keeping' processes in place to clear out unnecessary data which may clog the system up or slow it down – organisations may have policies in place requiring regular deletion of unwanted files by staff and may even send online messages as a reminder.

  Good file management systems will include designing organisational file structures (or trees), i.e. creating different drives or directories. An example of this would be one drive to store common or shared files, a second to store individual user files and so on. Like any good filing system, different categories of files can be stored in different locations with access restricted as necessary. In addition, good file management practices by all staff should be encouraged – users should create folders and sub-folders in which to organise and store their work for easy retrieval and delete old and unwanted files on a regular basis.

- **Monitoring of e-mails –** some organisations have software in place to monitor e-mails and may 'park' or hold messages if they contain anything worthy of scrutiny. This might include certain types of words (organisations may hold lists of words against which the software checks and if any are included – however innocent in intent - the message is stopped) or unusually large attachments.

Data integrity issues include:

- **Integrity of data** is about ***people security –*** that is, keeping data secure from human error or malicious intent which may cause data to be corrupted and may include:

  - *User policies* – formal written policies and procedures which staff often have to sign and agree to. These will usually state the do's and dont's of using the organisation's computer system (this often covers areas such as misuse of the Internet or unauthorised installation of software) and advise on such things as back-up, file management, access, storage and security requirements.

  - *Staff training* – many of the problems relating to misuse of data are not caused intentionally but happen because of users not knowing any better. A very important factor in data management is educating staff in the use of data systems and software and good file-management practices.

  - *Minimising errors of input* – this includes limiting who is able to input data, verifying data (e.g. data keyed in twice by different operators) and methods of validating operator input built into the design of a database.

  - *Restricting data access* to authorised people only in order to reduce the risk of errors or malicious behaviour.

Outcome 2

– *Protection against viruses/corruption* – e.g. anti-virus software or not permitting software/data or floppy disks, etc. to be brought into or removed from the office, requirement to scan disks, etc.

All these data management features have an impact on:

- **Speed** at which data can be input, processed, transferred and retrieved, which in turn impacts on how effectively data can be used by the organisation for management decisions. This can have major implications for how competitive organisations are – the more up-todate and timely the information is, the more responsive organisations can be and the better the decisions that are made.

- **Accessibility** of data by users. This includes appropriate access. It is very important that all who need to access information are able to do so; however, it is just as important that those who do not, can't.

- **Security and integrity** of data. If unauthorised users can access or corrupt data, the effectiveness and competitiveness of the organisation is severely reduced. Management must be able to rely on correct, reliable and confidential information on which to make decisions.

- **Responsiveness –** decisions are only as good as the information on which they are based. If information is out of date, then so are the decisions that are taken. Organisations need to respond quickly in an increasingly changing business environment – if they can't they lose their competitiveness. Good data management is about providing accurate and up-to-date information so that managers can respond to the threats and opportunities they face.

- **Customer satisfaction** is all about meeting customer need. The quality of data management may affect such things as the accuracy of customer records, the speed at which customer orders are processed and the response times for dealing with customer queries and complaints. Remember, customer satisfaction is often less to do with the quality of goods than with the quality of customer service people have received. Poor data management can have a huge impact on the quality of customer service.

- **Staff morale and motivation** can be seriously affected by the quality of data management. Working with slow, inaccurate data or inefficient data systems can be both frustrating and stressful for staff.

- **Quality of information –** good data management should ensure that the data that is held by the organisation is both of the appropriate quality and quantity. It should be accurate and up-to-date but should also not be difficult to find due to poor file management or excess or unwanted or unnecessary data which has been allowed to remain on the system.

Outcome 2

Consequences of poor management
The consequences of poor data management can be serious for organisations as it affects them in a number of ways:

- **Cost –** duplication of data and user effort, human error or inefficient systems all waste time and resources and carry a cost implication.

- **Reduced effectiveness –** if an organisation cannot rely on good information (both in terms of quality and speed) then the quality of its decisions is affected, which reduces how effectively it can perform.

- **Reputation –** poor responsiveness to customers, inaccurate data and consequent poor decision making can all affect the reputation of an organisation (for the worse) and impact on future business.

- **Legal action –** organisations must conform to the legal requirements relating to holding data and ensure confidentiality. Should poor data management compromise this, organisations could find themselves faced with legal action.

- **Loss of customers –** as mentioned already, poor data management can impact badly on the level of customer service organisations can deliver.